

Trade-off: tamoxifen may decrease the risk of breast cancer, but it increases the risk of thrombosis and cancer of the womb

Early detection combined with effective treatment can reduce the death rate associated with breast cancer. However there is a lot of controversy about some breast cancer prevention strategies for women who are at 'high-risk' of contracting the disease, according to an article in the latest edition of *Australian Prescriber*.

"Breast cancer is the most commonest cause of death from cancer in Australian women with approximately 1 in 13 Australian women estimated to develop breast cancer by the age of 75 years. Although the cause of breast cancer is unknown there are numerous risk factors, and being female and ageing are the top two," said the author Sue-Anne McLachlan from the Oncology Department at St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne.

"Studies show that many women overestimate their breast cancer risk. At the same time breast cancer is a serious disease and the cause of ill health and early death. So evaluating the risk of developing this disease along with the problems associated with risk prevention strategies such as drug therapy is challenging. And more often than not it becomes a treatment versus prevention issue," Dr McLachlan said.

"Tamoxifen has been studied in several trials for the primary prevention of breast cancer and is widely recognised as being effective. At the same time there is evidence to suggest that tamoxifen increases the risk of deep vein thrombosis and cancer of the womb. Therefore the overall harm:benefit ratio for the use of tamoxifen in prevention is still unclear," Dr McLachlan said.

"At this stage risk reduction strategies such as tamoxifen are highly problematic and further investigation is needed. So it is important for all women to speak to their doctor and to undertake early detection strategies such as breast screening," Dr McLachlan said.

For the complete article visit the *Australian Prescriber* web site www.australianprescriber.com *Australian Prescriber* is an independent review providing critical commentary on therapeutic topics for health professionals, published by the National Prescribing Service (NPS). The NPS is an independent Australian organisation for Quality Use of Medicines. For further information about the NPS visit the web site www.nps.org.au

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