

## Gender affirming hormones - oestrogen

Oestrogen is a feminising hormone commonly used for gender affirmation. This information sheet outlines how to access oestrogen, what to expect, possible side effects, and the permanent changes to your body that you need to be aware of.

At Equinox we practice the 'Informed consent model of care' for gender affirming hormones. We partner with you to ensure that the hormones are tailored to your needs and monitored carefully to prevent any medical problems.

By the time you discuss gender affirmation with your GP it is likely you have already done your own research about hormone therapies. Hormone prescribing in Australia may be different to hormone prescribing in other countries. For example, some of the commonly used medications for gender transition in the USA are not available in Australia.

The most commonly prescribed oestrogen in Australia for gender affirmation is oestradiol. This is available in different forms - tablets, gels, patches and implants. Some of these preparations are subsidised on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), others have to be purchased privately and are more expensive.

### How do I access oestrogen?

Gender affirming hormones are usually prescribed by GP's, endocrinologists, paediatricians and sexual health doctors. In Australia, there is a legal requirement that if you are under 18yo you require written permission to start hormones from all your legal parents or guardians. If you are under 18yo you will also require a mental health check in and review prior to commencing hormones with a psychologist or psychiatrist. This is to ensure you are able to give informed consent and have no significant psychiatric issues that require stabilisation prior to commencing hormones.

### What will happen to my body when I take oestrogen?

Some people will notice changes within a few weeks of commencing oestrogen. Other people find the changes occur more slowly. Most people will be looking noticeably different within 6-12 months.

Changes you may experience within a few weeks:

- Calmer mood
- Decreased libido (sex drive)
- Less erections
- Softer skin
- **Infertility (this may be permanent).**

Changes you may experience within a few months:

- Body fat redistribution (more curvy body shape with body fat on hips and thighs)
- Reduced muscle bulk and strength
- Breast tenderness and swelling.

Longer term changes:

- Breast growth (may take 2-3 years)
- Reduction in size of penis and testicles

- Reduced facial and body hair.

### **Are the changes permanent?**

Breast growth is usually permanent and breast tissue will remain even if you stop hormones. If you wanted to reverse this, you would require an operation to remove the breast tissue.

### **Infertility can occur very soon after starting oestrogen and may be permanent.**

It is highly recommended to store sperm prior to starting oestrogen. You may be quite sure you don't want to have biological children, but some people feel differently about this in the future. Freezing sperm before you start hormones gives you the option to access your sperm in the future if you want to have children. Your GP can explain to you where, and how, to freeze sperm and the costs involved.

### **Which oestrogen is available?**

In Australia, oestradiol is available in tablets, gels, patches and implants. If you are taking oestradiol tablets expect to swallow 2-4 pills per day. Oestradiol patches stick onto your skin and are replaced every 3-7 days. Oestradiol gel is applied daily, usually 1 sachet of gel rubbed into the thigh each day.

Oestradiol implants are small pellets injected into the fat layer under the skin of the abdomen or buttock. Implants are not available on the PBS and usually need to be ordered on a prescription from NSW. Implants are expensive but last around 9-12 months. You can discuss the pros and cons of each type of oestrogen with your GP.

### **How long do I take oestrogen for?**

Oestrogen therapy is usually life-long. However, you can stop or reduce hormone doses at any time, for any reason.

### **Is it safe?**

There aren't many long-term studies looking at the safety of gender affirming hormones. However, oestrogen is a commonly used medication in Australia as it is also used in the contraceptive pill and menopause hormone therapy. Oestrogen medication is considered to be safe when prescribed under medical supervision. It's important to have regular check-ups and blood tests when taking hormones.

### **Will oestrogen cause side effects or make me sick?**

Side effects of oestrogen are similar to side effects of the contraceptive pill. Some people experience nausea (sick feeling) and some people put on weight. Gallstones are more likely in people taking oestrogen. Gallstones are stones in the gallbladder (a small sack underneath the liver) that can cause pain in the abdomen after eating.

Oestrogen can cause serious problems such as blood clots and liver damage, however these side effects are rare. If you or anyone in your family has had a blood clot it is important to mention this to your GP. Some breast cancers are made worse by hormones so let your GP know if anyone in your family has had cancer. Migraines can worsen with oestrogen and may affect the type of oestrogen that is recommended. Understanding your medical history makes it easier for the GP to tailor your hormones to your particular situation.

### **Will oestrogen make me depressed?**

Most people feel calm when they take oestrogen, and sometimes more emotional, for example some people find it easier to cry. Some people experience mood swings or depression on oestrogen.

Generally, mental health improves for most people when they commence gender affirming hormone therapy.

### **Do I need to quit smoking?**

YES! Oestrogen + smoking can be very dangerous combination - there is a risk of stroke and blood clots. Talk to your GP if you need help with quitting smoking or vaping.

### **Monitoring oestrogen levels**

Your GP will let you know how often to come in for a check-up and blood test. Check-ups are usually 3 monthly initially, and 6-12 monthly in the longer term. Check-ups include blood pressure, height, and weight checks.

### **Will oestrogen change my voice?**

No. If you would like to change your voice speak with your GP for options. Speech therapy and voice exercises are usually the first step.

### **Do I need to tell my other Doctors I'm taking oestrogen?**

It's important to let your treating doctors and specialists know about all medications you are taking. There can be a risk of interactions with other medications, and confusion with blood test interpretation. Oestrogen may need to be stopped temporarily if you are having surgery to reduce your blood clot risk.

### **Is oestrogen expensive?**

No. In Australia, if you have a Medicare card, most oestradiol tablets, patches, and gels are subsidised by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS). Expect to spend around \$30 per month. The price for health care card and pension card holders is around \$7 a month. If you don't have a Medicare card the medicines will be more expensive. Oestradiol implants are not covered by the PBS and cost between \$100-\$200.

### **Can I travel with oestrogen?**

You may require a doctor's letter if travelling with medications. Your GP can organise this for you.

### **I'm already taking oestrogen (self-medding). Will my doctor be angry?**

It's important to let your doctor know about any medications you are taking so they can support your ongoing health and wellbeing. You won't be in trouble!

### **Do I need a mammogram?**

Everyone with breast tissue, including trans people, should attend for 2 yearly mammograms from age 50-69 years. Sometimes mammograms are recommended at a younger age if there are people in your family with breast cancer. Ask your GP.

### **Can I stop hormones?**

Yes! You can stop hormones at any time for any reason. It's your body and your decision. A few weeks after stopping hormones your body shape may be similar to how you looked before hormones. Breast tissue and infertility may be permanent.

## Consent form for oestrogen therapy

Name.....

Age.....

Date of birth.....

### As a result of taking oestrogen I expect to experience:

- Breast growth
- Redistribution of body fat
- Decreased muscle strength
- Softer skin
- A decrease in hair on my body and face
- Decreased testicle and penis size and less erections
- I may become permanently infertile. I have considered my options regarding sperm storage.

### I understand that side effects and possible risks of oestrogen include:

- Nausea (sick feeling)
- Headache
- Weight gain
- Mood swings
- Blood clots
- Pulmonary embolism (blood clot in lung)
- Liver problems
- Gallstones
- Breast cancer
- High blood pressure

I have read and understood this document.

I understand that the effects of long-term use of oestrogen are not fully known.

I understand that the rates of change and amount of change that oestrogen can produce are very variable from person to person.

I have had the implications of oestrogen therapy explained to me in full by

Dr..... and have had ample opportunity to ask questions.

Signed ..... Date.....

**Additional consent for those aged under 18 years:**

Parent / legal guardian name

.....

Parent / legal guardian name

.....

We have read and understood this document about oestrogen for gender affirmation. We have had the implications of oestrogen therapy explained in full by

Dr..... and have had ample opportunity to ask questions.

We give consent for our child, ..... to take gender affirming hormones. We believe this is in their best interest, that they have persistent gender dysphoria, and that they are mature enough to make their own informed decisions. This includes an understanding of permanent side effects with oestrogen therapy such as breast growth and loss of fertility.

Signed by Parents / Guardians:

.....Date.....

.....Date.....

I, Dr .....am satisfied that

.....has persistent and

well documented gender dysphoria, and is able to give informed consent for gender affirming hormone treatment.

Signed.....Date.....