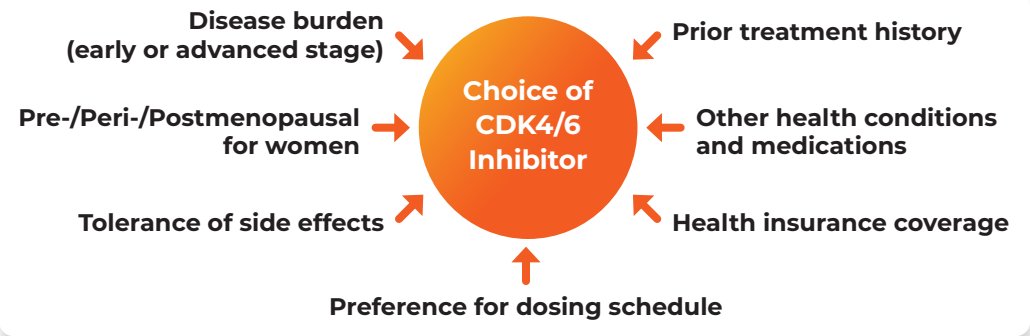
Navigating Your Journey With CDK4/6 Inhibitors: A Guide for Thriving During Treatment

CDK4/6 inhibitors are a common type of oral medication used to treat many patients diagnosed with hormone receptor (HR)–positive/HER2-negative breast cancer. There are 3 CDK4/6 inhibitors available to treat patients with HR-positive/HER2-negative breast cancer: abemaciclib (Verzenio), palbociclib (Ibrance), and ribociclib (Kisqali). All 3 CDK4/6 inhibitors are approved for treating patients with advanced or metastatic HR-positive/HER2-negative breast cancer. Abemaciclib and ribociclib are also approved for treating patients with early-stage HR-positive/HER2-negative breast cancer following surgery to remove the cancer who have a high risk of recurrence. Which of these CDK4/6 inhibitors will be best for you depends on a variety of factors, including whether you have early-stage or advanced-stage disease, your prior treatment history, for women whether you are pre- or postmenopausal, your tolerance for possible side effects, other health conditions (especially gastrointestinal issues, blood count abnormalities, and cardiac abnormalities), and possibly your health insurance. Your healthcare professionals can help you navigate this decision.



Side Effects of Treatment With CDK4/6 Inhibitors and Endocrine Therapy

Adhering to your prescribed treatment with CDK4/6 inhibitors is crucial for improving outcomes for HR-positive/HER2-negative breast cancer. Multiple clinical trials have shown that these medications, when used alongside endocrine therapy, significantly reduce the risk of cancer recurrence and prevent disease progression. Although side effects such as fatigue or gastrointestinal symptoms may occur, effective management strategies such as supportive care, dose holds, dose reductions, or switching to an alternative CDK4/6 inhibitor are possible to help you continue treatment without compromising quality of life. Of importance, dose reductions are not associated with reduced efficacy.

Side Effects of Treatment: What to Expect and When to Call Your Doctor

Endocrine (Antiestrogen) Therapy (Aromatase Inhibitor, Fulvestrant, or Tamoxifen)

Potential long-term side effects

- Loss of bone density (osteoporosis), increased risk of fracture
- Increased risk of high cholesterol and cardiovascular disease/events, especially in patients with history of chest pain or prior heart attack
- Small but significant risk of uterine cancer when taking tamoxifen

CDK4/6 Inhibitor[1-3]

Important side effects that require close monitoring but are less likely to occur

- Lowering of white blood cell count (neutropenia) leading to serious infection
- Inflammation of the lungs (interstitial lung disease or pneumonitis)
- Changes in liver enzymes that are reversible
- Abemaciclib primarily: diarrhea leading to dehydration
- Abemaciclib only: risk of blood clot or pulmonary embolism
- Ribociclib only: severe skin rash, pain, or blistering of skin or mouth, with or without fever (severe cutaneous adverse reactions)
- Ribociclib only: fluttering in chest (palpitations), dizziness, or fainting (QT interval prolongation)

Endocrine (Antiestrogen) Therapy (Aromatase Inhibitor, Fulvestrant, or Tamoxifen)

Typical and generally manageable side effects

- Joint stiffness or pain
- Hot flashes, night sweats
- Trouble sleeping, insomnia
- Changes in weight
- Nausea
- Fatigue
- Fluid retention (swelling)
- Mood changes (anxiety, depression)
- Hair thinning
- Irregular menses or vaginal discharge
- Vaginal dryness or irritation, decreased sex drive
- Cognitive changes (trouble focusing, problems with memory)

CDK4/6 Inhibitor[1-3]

Typical and generally treatable side effects

- Diarrhea
- Nausea and vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Decreased appetite
- Fatigue
- Low white blood cell count
- Increased risk of infection
- Low platelet count
- Body aches
- Hair thinning
- Changes in blood creatinine

Notes:

When to Call Your Doctor



- If you develop any fever or illness (eg, cold, cough, shortness of breath, urinary tract infection)
- If you have diarrhea not controlled by medications (loperamide)
- If you develop new or worsening cough, shortness of breath, wheezing, or fever
- If you develop a skin rash that is painful and/or peeling, with or without blisters or sores on your mouth or skin
- Unilateral (one-sided) pain or swelling in one of your arms or legs
- Any new fluttering in the chest (palpitations) or if you have episodes of feeling lightheaded or dizzy, or pain in your chest
- Nausea or vomiting not controlled with medications or if you are unable to keep any fluids down
- Serious or significant joint or muscle pain affecting your ability to do activities
- Any symptom or side effect that is interfering with your ability to work, care for your home or others, or care for yourself

Notes:

Following and Completing Your Prescribed Therapy

- Establish a routine! Take your medicines at the same time(s) every day and be consistent (with or without food)
- Put pill bottles/boxes in an area you use every day to remind yourself to take your medications (eg, nightstand, bathroom, kitchen)
- Use “pill reminder” apps on your smartphone or tablet
- Set daily reminders on your smartphone, calendar, or tablet
- Avoid grapefruit and grapefruit juices
- Always check with your doctor or nurse before starting herbs or supplements
- Have a plan for side effects—pick up all over-the-counter/prescribed medicines (eg, antidiarrheal, antinausea) before your treatment starts and make sure you know when to use them!
- Ask your doctor/pharmacist/nurse what to do if you miss a dose
- Remember that you have options! Call your doctor/nurse with any side effect that is difficult for you to manage
- Ask that instructions be communicated and/or written in your primary language
- Bring a friend or family member to your appointment so they learn about your treatment plan and can be a support to you, and ask if you can record the discussion

References

1. Abemaciclib [prescribing information]. Indianapolis, IN: Lilly; 2025.
2. Palbociclib [prescribing information]. New York, NY: Pfizer Labs; 2024.
3. Ribociclib [prescribing information]. East Hanover, NJ: Novartis Pharmaceuticals; 2024.

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