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Novartis Bone Drug Reduces Breast Cancer Relapses - Study

By Peter Loftus

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CHICAGO (Dow Jones)--Adding a [Novartis AG](#) (NVS) bone drug to hormone therapy lowered the risk of recurrence of certain breast cancer cases, according to a new study.

The drug, Zometa, already is used to treat bone damage caused by cancer and last year had sales of \$1.3 billion. Previous research has suggested it might also have an anticancer effect.

The new study enrolled about 1,800 premenopausal women with breast cancer who had undergone surgery to remove tumors. The women had cancer that tested positive for hormone receptors. The study had four arms: treatment with hormone therapies tamoxifen or anastrozole, with or without Zometa, and the treatment period was three years. Anastrozole is sold under the brand Arimidex by [AstraZeneca PLC](#) (AZN).

The study found that the addition of Zometa to both forms of hormone therapy reduced the risk of cancer returning or death by 36% compared with hormone therapy alone, after a median follow-up of five years. The study didn't find a significant difference between the two hormone therapies.

Sixteen deaths had occurred among patients who received Zometa with hormone therapy versus 26 deaths in patients who received hormone therapy alone, but the reduction wasn't statistically significant. Longer-term follow-up is needed to determine if Zometa improved overall survival.

The results were released Saturday at the annual meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncology in Chicago.

"This study is the first large-scale trial to demonstrate the significant antitumor benefit of" Zometa, the study's lead investigator, Michael Gnant of the Medical University of Vienna, said in a [Novartis](#) press release. "These new findings may allow oncologists to further improve the standard of care for premenopausal women with hormone-sensitive breast cancer."

The treatment was well-tolerated and there were no unexpected side effects. In past studies, Zometa has been linked to kidney problems and other side effects. Also, there have been reports of jaw problems in users of the class of drugs to which Zometa belongs.

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