

Selective Estrogen-Receptor Modulators for Primary Prevention of Breast Cancer

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INTRODUCTION

Selective estrogen receptor modulators (SERMs) impact a variety of biologic processes regulated by activated estrogen receptor (ER). Depending on the target tissue, physiologic conditions, and their structure, SERMs may exhibit either estrogen antagonist or estrogen agonist effects. SERMs have a long history in the treatment of breast cancer, based on estrogen antagonist activity in ER-positive breast cancer cells. Beginning with tamoxifen, SERMs have moved to the prevention arena, where their partial estrogen effects may provide other organ benefits, particularly for postmenopausal women. It is because of these partial estrogen agonist effects on organs such as the bone, vagina, CNS, and cardiovascular system that SERMs are likely to remain preferable to pure antiestrogens as primary breast cancer prevention agents in the context of total women's health.¹ The ideal SERM should function as an antiestrogen in the breast and uterus and a partial estrogen agonist in skeletal, cardiovascular, CNS, gastrointestinal tract, and vagina. Further, this ideal SERM should be devoid of procoagulant effects and should not be associated with an increase in perimenopausal symptoms. Although several generations of SERMs have been developed, the ideal SERM for prevention remains elusive. We will review progress to date for SERMs as single agents and potential for combination therapy in the future.

BIOLOGY BEHIND THE MULTIFACETED ACTION OF SERMs

Depending on their structure and context, SERMs differentially modify expression of multiple genes whose transcription is regulated by activated ER.^{2,3} A SERM's gene- and tissue-specific estrogen agonist or antagonist activity is determined primarily by whether coactivators or corepressors are preferentially bound to the SERM/ER nuclear receptor transcription complex.⁴⁻⁷

The ability of a SERM to block coactivator recruitment into the ER-ligand binding pocket is dependent on its three-dimensional structure.⁸ When estrogen binds to ER, a conformational change occurs such that helix 12 is repositioned, exposing multiple coactivator sites. Subsequent to coactivator binding, full estrogen agonist transcription is initiated at both ER-activating function domains (AF-1 and -2).^{9,10} SERMs block full closure of helix 12, reducing the number of coactivation binding sites so that one or both activation domains are inhibited.^{9,10} SERMs such as tamoxifen, which block activation of AF-2 but not AF-1, might be expected to have partial estrogen agonist activity for a wider spectrum of target genes/tissue than SERMs such as raloxifene, arzoxifene, or acolbifene, which also block AF-1 activation.^{9,11} Frasor et al,³ using DNA microarrays, have recently shown that tamoxifen indeed appears to have estrogen agonist effects on more genes than does raloxifene.

Estrogen agonist or antagonist effects are also dependent on the organ-specific type and amount of ER (Table 1) available for ligand binding as well as the type of target gene promoter, estrogen response element (ERE), or AP-1 (Table 2).¹⁵⁻³⁶ For example, estrogen, when combined with ER β and acting at genes with an AP-1 type promoter, inhibits rather than facilitates gene transcription.^{16,17} Tamoxifen, when combined with ER β and a target gene promoter that uses an ERE, will function as an estrogen antagonist similar to the situation for ER α .^{13,15,18} However, when tamoxifen is combined with ER β and the target gene has an AP-1 type promoter, tamoxifen becomes a partial estrogen agonist.^{15,18,19} Generally, the amount of ER α increases and ER β decreases during the promotion and progression phases of breast cancer^{20,21}; however, breast cancers which have a substantial amount of ER β may exhibit tamoxifen resistance.^{22,23} Whether the same principles apply in the prevention setting is unclear.

The relative level of coactivators and corepressors in the nucleus may determine the agonist/antagonist profile of a SERM.^{23,24} Coactivator levels are increased by activation of the MAP kinase pathway.²⁴ Mitogenic signaling is rapidly upregulated when estrogen is bound to membrane ER. Under these circumstances (nongenomic pathway), estrogen in the presence of ligands (insulin-like growth factor [IGF] -1, transforming growth factor alpha) for tyrosine kinase receptors (IGF receptor [IGFR], HER-2, epidermal growth factor receptor [EGFR]) serves as a co-factor for activation of the tyrosine kinase receptors.^{6,25-29} The rapid cell cycle effects observed via activated membrane ER are distinct from the slower genomic pathway in which activated nuclear ER serves as a transcription factor for synthesis of a number of proteins, including several growth factors and their receptors.^{2,6} A SERM's relative potency depends on many factors including its bioavailability, serum and tissue half-life, affinity for the estrogen receptor, and rate of ubiquitination of the ligand-ER complex.^{9,30,31}

In summary, the organ-specific response to an individual SERM depends not only on the drug's structure

Table 2. Determinants of Whether a SERM Displays Estrogen Agonist or Antagonist Effects

SERM structure
(1) Inhibitors AF2
(2) Inhibitors AF2 + AF1
Tissue factors
(1) Level of ER α
(2) Level of ER β
(3) Level of activated EGFR, HER-2, IGFR
(4) Amount of co-activators co-repressors
Target gene
(1) Promoter activated by ERE
(2) Promoter activated by AP-1
E2 + ER α + ERE or AP-1 agonist
Tam + ER α + ERE or AP-1 antagonist
E2 + ER β + ERE agonist
Tam + ER β + ERE antagonist
E2 + ER β + AP-1 antagonist
Tam + ER β + AP-1 agonist

Abbreviations: SERM, selective estrogen-receptor modulator; AF, activating function domain; ER, estrogen receptor; EGFR, epidermal growth factor receptor; IGFR, insulin-like growth factor receptor; ERE, estrogen response element; AP, activating protein; E2, estradiol; Tam, tamoxifen.

and pharmacologic properties, but also upon the target tissue's ER α :ER β ratio, whether target genes are activated by ERE or an AP-1 transcription complex, and the level of MAP kinase pathway activation.³²⁻³⁶

TAMOXIFEN

Tamoxifen is a SERM with predominate estrogen antagonist effects in the breast, partial estrogen agonist activity in the bone, cardiovascular system and CNS, and predominant estrogen agonist effects in the uterus, liver, and vagina.³⁷⁻⁴⁵ The estrogen agonist effects of tamoxifen on the uterus and liver, which result in an increased incidence of uterine cancer and thromboembolic phenomena, keep it from being considered an ideal SERM. Nonetheless, tamoxifen is the only US Food and Drug Administration-approved drug in the United States for breast cancer risk reduction.⁴⁶

In an overview of four completed primary prevention trials in which tamoxifen was to be given for 5 or more years (National Surgical Adjuvant Breast and Bowel Project [NSABP] P-1,⁴⁷ International Breast Cancer Intervention Study-1,⁴⁸ Royal Marsden,⁴⁹ and Italian⁵⁰), women randomly assigned to tamoxifen had a 36% reduction in the incidence of ductal carcinoma-in-situ (DCIS) and a 46% reduction in invasive breast cancer.⁵¹ ER-positive tumors were reduced by 48% in the overview, but no significant reduction was observed in the incidence of ER-negative tumors.⁵¹ The excess of serious side effects in women taking tamoxifen (116 events) almost offset the reduction in cancer incidence (176 cases).⁵¹ The incidence of endometrial cancer was increased 2.4-fold, deep venous thrombosis 1.9-fold, and cerebral vascular accident 1.5-fold.⁵¹ The increase in uterine epithelial hyperplasia, as well as uterine cancer, may be the result of

Table 1. Tissue Type and Predominant Estrogen Receptors

Tissue	Estrogen-Receptor Type
Breast	α , β (α elevated in cancer)
Uterus	α , β (mostly α)
Ovary	α , β
Blood Vessels	β
Heart	α , β
Bone	α , cortical β , cancellous
Brain	α , hypothalamus β , whole brain
Gut	β
Immune	β
Liver	α , β (mostly α)

NOTE. Adapted from Bord et al,¹² Kuiper et al,¹³ and Gustafsson.¹⁴

tamoxifen-induced increases in the steroid receptor coactivator (SRC) and increases in uterine IGF-1 and IGFR activation.⁵² In the overview analysis, a nonsignificant increase in death from any cause was observed in women randomly assigned to tamoxifen.⁵¹ Despite the favorable effect of tamoxifen on several risk biomarkers for coronary artery disease, there was no significant reduction in coronary artery disease-related events.⁵¹ However, another meta-analysis, which included 25 breast cancer treatment trials in addition to the four prevention trials, indicated that tamoxifen significantly decreased myocardial infarction deaths.⁵³ Because of major side effects and incomplete efficacy, it has been estimated that only one in four women meeting the National Surgical Adjuvant Breast and Bowel Project P-1 minimum eligibility requirement (5-year Gail risk $\geq 1.67\%$) for tamoxifen would have a favorable benefit:risk ratio. Fear of both major and minor side effects and uncertainty over who will benefit often make tamoxifen unattractive to healthy women.^{47,48}

Despite endorsement by the American Society of Clinical Oncology and the US Food and Drug Administration, only 5% to 30% of eligible high-risk women agree to take tamoxifen for primary prevention following a recommendation by their health care provider.⁵⁴⁻⁵⁶ By selecting women with high short-term risk, and those most likely to respond to SERMs, the benefit:risk ratio can be maximized.^{57,58} Women with a deleterious mutation in *BRCA1* or *BRCA2*, or with a prior diagnosis of DCIS, lobular carcinoma-in-situ (LCIS), and/or atypical hyperplasia, have $\geq 5\%$ 5-year risk of breast cancer.⁵⁹⁻⁶² This level of risk is generally associated with clinical benefit from prevention tamoxifen regardless of a woman's age or whether or not her uterus is intact.⁵⁷ A limited number of studies in *BRCA1/2* mutation carriers appear to indicate benefit for tamoxifen despite the observation that the majority of *BRCA1*-associated cancers are ER-negative.⁶³⁻⁶⁵ Study results have been mixed, however. Randomization to tamoxifen was correlated with a reduction in breast cancers in *BRCA2*-, but not *BRCA1*-associated cancers in the National Surgical Adjuvant Breast and Bowel Project (NSABP) P-1 trial.⁶⁶ Atypical hyperplasia, LCIS, and the majority of non-high-grade DCIS lesions are characterized by a high proportion of ER positive cells,²⁰ which in turn predict favorable outcome to tamoxifen in adjuvant trials.⁶⁷⁻⁶⁹ The finding of any of these precancerous lesions would then most likely result in a benefit:risk ratio which would favor tamoxifen use.⁴⁷ Hershman et al⁷⁰ have determined that 5 years of tamoxifen is likely to be cost effective for women with prior atypical ductal hyperplasia, LCIS, and/or 5-year Gail risk $>5\%$, particularly if the drug is started before the age of 60 years. However, the majority of women at increased risk on the basis of family history have never had a diagnostic biopsy.

The high incidence and multicentric distribution of atypical ductal and lobular hyperplasia in prophylactic

mastectomy specimens from women of hereditary breast cancer families suggests that atypical hyperplasia should be amenable to discovery by random tissue sampling in high-risk women.⁷¹ Approximately 20% of women with a median age of 44 years at increased risk by virtue of a first-degree relative or multiple second-degree relatives with breast cancer, prior precancerous biopsy, or contralateral breast cancer can be expected to exhibit atypia in their cytology specimens when cells are harvested by random periareolar fine needle aspiration.⁷² Similar figures are reported for ductal lavage.⁷³ Detection of atypia by nipple aspirate fluid harvest or random periareolar fine needle aspiration has been associated in prospective studies with a substantial increase in relative risk in average- and high-risk populations, respectively.^{72,74} In addition to breast tissue morphology, other biomarkers have also been associated with increase in risk for breast cancer including serum IGF-1 and its binding protein 3 (IGFBP-3) in premenopausal women; serum bioavailable estradiol, free testosterone and sex hormone binding globulin (SHBG) in postmenopausal women; and mammographic breast density in both pre- and postmenopausal women.^{59,75-77} It is unknown at present whether detection of atypia or any other risk biomarker will increase the likelihood that eligible women will take prevention tamoxifen following a recommendation for its use. However, Vogel et al⁵⁶ reported that eligible women with a prior diagnostic biopsy exhibiting atypical hyperplasia were more likely than women without atypical hyperplasia to enter the NSABP P-1 or the Study of Tamoxifen and Raloxifene (STAR) trials.

Tamoxifen use has been observed to have a favorable effect on many risk markers including serum IGF-1, IGFBP-3, SHBG, mammographic breast density, and subsequent prevalence of breast biopsies with benign breast disease with and without atypical hyperplasia.⁷⁸⁻⁸⁰ Consequently, modulation of many of these risk biomarkers is used in early clinical trials to evaluate promising new prevention strategies.^{81,82} It is not yet clear that favorable risk biomarker modulation accurately predicts prevention of breast cancer for an individual woman.

In summary, the most serious adverse events attributable to tamoxifen are the increased risk of uterine cancer and thromboembolic phenomena. Furthermore, up to one half of ER-positive breast cancers and the majority of ER-negative cancers are not prevented with tamoxifen.^{47,48,51,83} Despite these drawbacks, the use of tamoxifen has been judged to be cost effective as a primary breast cancer prevention agent in women with prior atypical hyperplasia carcinoma-in-situ, and/or 5-year Gail risk $>5\%$.

Current SERM prevention research aims to enhance the benefit:risk ratio observed with tamoxifen through: (1) use of low-dose tamoxifen to reduce side effects; (2) development of new SERMs with a more favorable

estrogen antagonist/agonist profile; (3) development of combination therapy including SERMs for prevention of ER-positive tamoxifen resistant and ER-negative breast cancer.

Low-Dose Tamoxifen

Reduction in the proliferation marker Ki67 after several weeks of tamoxifen has been associated with subsequent clinical response in cancer treatment trials.⁸⁴ Consequently, reduction in proliferation between baseline core biopsy and re-excision 4 to 6 weeks later in women with DCIS or a small invasive cancer is often used to define a potentially effective dose range for a prevention agent in the so-called presurgical clinical model.^{81,82} Using this model, Decensi et al⁸⁵ recently reported the results of a trial in which women were randomly assigned to one of two low doses (1 or 5 mg) or a standard dose (20 mg) of tamoxifen administered daily for 4 weeks between biopsy and definitive surgical resection of their breast cancer. Women with ER-negative and ER-positive tumors not undergoing preoperative treatment served as nonrandomized controls. Despite a >10-fold difference in tamoxifen serum concentration, there were no significant differences in change in breast tissue Ki-67 (Fig 1)⁸⁵ in the two low-dose (1 or 5 mg/d) versus standard dose (20 mg/d) arms.^{85,86} However, there was a significant difference in change in Ki-67 between the tamoxifen treatment groups (relative median decrease of 15%) and controls (relative median increase of 13%). A dose response relationship was observed for levels of several blood protein biomarkers reflecting tamoxifen's estrogen agonist effects on the liver. These include increased levels of SHBG and decreased levels of C-reactive protein, fibrogen, antithrombin III, and

low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol. These observations added further support to the authors' hypothesis that low-dose tamoxifen might be an effective estrogen antagonist in the breast, but the reduced dosage would result in a less potent estrogen agonist effect on the liver and uterus and fewer serious side effects. In support of this hypothesis, de Lima et al⁸⁷ observed that tamoxifen in doses of 5, 10, or 20 mg was able to significantly suppress proliferation in fibroadenomas in premenopausal women.

Raloxifene

Raloxifene belongs to the benzothiophene class of SERMs. Its structural differences (Fig 2) from the triphenylethylene tamoxifen lead to a slightly different tissue-specific estrogen agonist/antagonist profile,⁸⁸ which includes greater estrogen agonist activity in bone but reduced estrogen agonist activity in the uterus.⁸⁹ Preclinical studies predicted less efficacy than tamoxifen in inhibiting estradiol stimulated tumors.^{90,91} Clinical studies have shown little activity in the usual dose of 60 mg/d in women with metastatic breast cancer previously exposed to tamoxifen,⁹² but modest activity with higher doses of the drug.⁹³

Because of its estrogen agonist activity in bone, raloxifene was explored as an agent for osteoporosis prevention in the Multiple Outcomes of Raloxifene (MORE) trial. In this trial, postmenopausal women with osteopenia or osteoporosis and a mean age of 66.5 years were randomized to 4 years of raloxifene 60 mg/m² or 120 mg/m² versus placebo. Raloxifene at both dose levels significantly reduced the rate of vertebral fractures at 3 years compared to placebo.^{94,95}

A secondary analysis of the MORE trial also indicated a significant reduction in breast cancer incidence for women randomly assigned to raloxifene.^{96,97} Raloxifene reduced the incidence of all breast cancers by 62%, invasive breast cancer by 72%, and invasive ER-positive breast cancer by 84%. Similar to findings for tamoxifen in the NSABP P-1 trial, there was no reduction of ER-negative tumors.⁹⁷ Unlike tamoxifen in the NSABP P-1 trial, no reduction in DCIS was observed for women randomly assigned to raloxifene. Importantly, randomization to raloxifene was not associated with an excess of uterine cancers or episodes of postmenopausal uterine bleeding.⁹⁷

Raloxifene, like tamoxifen, is associated with an increase in procoagulant activity, probably as a result of its estrogen agonist-like effects on the liver.⁹⁸ Women randomly assigned to raloxifene in the MORE trial had a three-fold excess of thromboembolic events compared with the placebo group, similar to that observed for women randomly assigned to tamoxifen in the NSABP P-1 trial.⁹⁶ Raloxifene's effects on the neuroendocrine system are also similar to tamoxifen,⁹⁹ leading to elevations in follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) and estradiol in

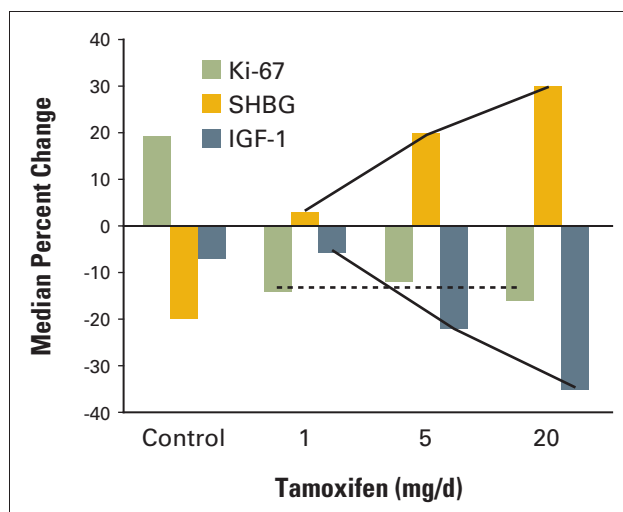


Fig 1. Dose-dependent changes in serum levels of sex hormone binding globulin (SHBG) and insulin-like growth factor-1 (IGF-1) versus dose-independent changes in Ki-67 expression observed in breast cancer patients treated with low doses of tamoxifen.⁸⁵

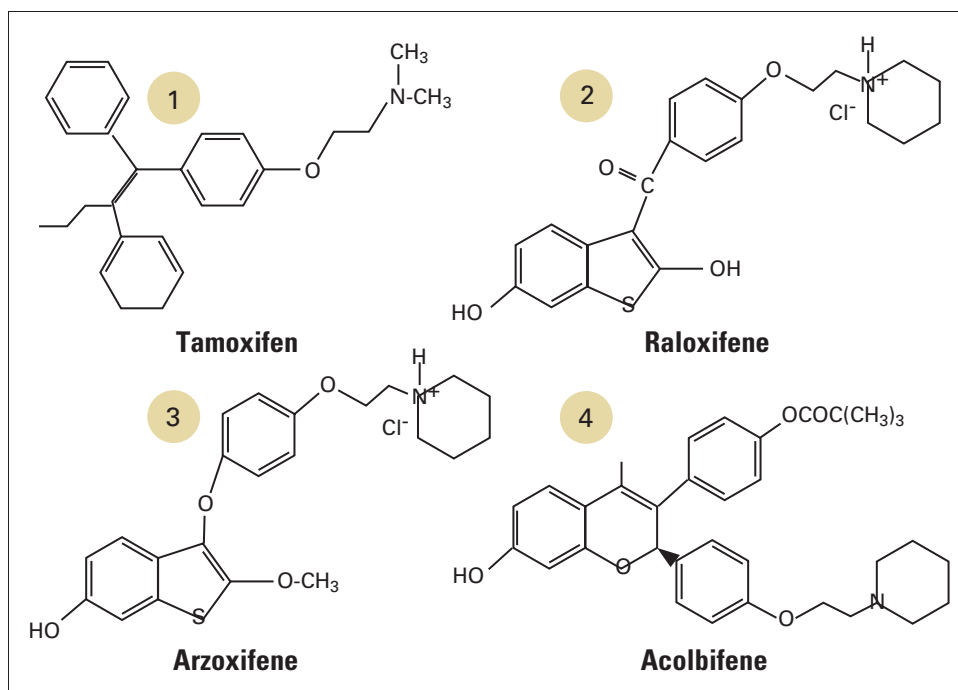


Fig 2. Chemical structure of four generations of selective estrogen receptor modulators (SERMs) representative of the four generations of SERM development.

premenopausal women¹⁰⁰ and reductions in FSH and luteinizing hormone (LH) in postmenopausal women¹⁰¹ and an increase in hot flashes.^{102,103} In an integrated analysis of several trials, hot flashes were reported in 28% of women randomly assigned to raloxifene versus 21% of those randomly assigned to placebo.¹⁰⁴ Similar to tamoxifen,^{105,106} prolonged administration of raloxifene in elderly women does not appear to impair cognition.¹⁰⁷

Raloxifene's partial estrogen agonist effects on the liver results in reduction of total and LDL cholesterol, C-reactive protein, and homocysteine.^{102,108,109} However, little change in triglycerides or high-density lipoproteins has been observed.¹⁰⁸ With the exception of triglycerides, the effects on lipids are similar to those observed for tamoxifen.^{39,110-114} Raloxifene administration is associated with an increase in leptin in pre- and postmenopausal women,^{115,116} similar to that observed for tamoxifen.^{117,118} Increases in leptin may be associated with increased risk of breast and colorectal cancer.¹¹⁹⁻¹²² In the MORE trial, women at increased risk for coronary disease who were randomly assigned to raloxifene had a 40% reduction in cardiovascular related events ($P = .03$) but there was no reduction in cardiovascular events for the group as a whole.¹²³

Similar to tamoxifen, raloxifene use has been observed to have a favorable effect on serum hormones and growth factors that have been identified as risk markers. Specifically, raloxifene causes an increase in SHBG^{124,125} and IGFBP-3^{115,126} in pre- and postmenopausal women, and a decrease in IGF-1 in postmenopausal women.^{126,127}

The same effects on bone mineral density were observed with raloxifene as had been reported for tamoxifen;

density was reduced in premenopausal women and increased in postmenopausal women.^{37,108,124}

Investigators and study participants in the MORE trial were given the option of further participation in a 4-year extension trial of raloxifene versus placebo. The extension was entitled the “Continuing Outcomes Relevant to Evista (CORE)” trial. Breast cancer incidence was a primary end point in CORE. Since there were no obvious differences between the 60-mg and the 120-mg dose levels in MORE, those women randomly assigned to either dose in MORE were given 60 mg of raloxifene per day, and those originally randomly assigned to placebo were continued on placebo. Approximately two thirds of the women who participated in MORE contributed data to CORE. For women participating in the 4 years of CORE, total breast cancers were reduced by 50%, invasive breast cancer was reduced by 59%, and ER-positive invasive breast cancer was reduced by 66%. Similar to MORE, there was no reduction in DCIS or ER-negative invasive breast cancer for women randomly assigned to raloxifene.¹²⁸ There was no significant difference in overall or breast cancer-specific survival. The CORE study is important, as reduction in breast cancers in the raloxifene group continued over the entire 8-year period (an overall relative reduction of 58% in MORE plus CORE). Whether this is a direct result of continuing raloxifene for another 4 years or a carry-over effect from the initial 4 years is difficult to determine. Participants in the MORE and CORE study were of relatively average risk for their age group. Approximately half the subjects had a 5-year Gail risk $\leq 1.67\%$. Thus, prolonged raloxifene administration appears safe and

beneficial for average-risk, postmenopausal, osteopenic women for both osteoporosis and breast cancer prevention.

It is important to note that in the MORE trial women with detectable estradiol levels (≥ 2.7 pg/mL) had a higher cancer incidence rate than the group at large and were the only ones who appeared to derive significant benefit from raloxifene. Women with undetectable estradiol levels had a similar low risk with or without raloxifene administration.¹²⁹

Is raloxifene equivalent to tamoxifen for breast cancer prevention in high-risk, postmenopausal women, with perhaps fewer side effects? This question is being addressed in the National Cancer Institute-sponsored STAR trial in which postmenopausal women with a 5-year Gail risk of $\geq 1.67\%$ and/or LCIS were randomly assigned to 5 years of tamoxifen or raloxifene.⁵⁶ If equivalence in breast cancer risk reduction with fewer serious adverse events is observed with raloxifene, it would likely become the new standard of care for primary breast cancer prevention in postmenopausal women. However, tamoxifen would remain the standard of care for premenopausal women.

The potential cardioprotective effects of raloxifene for postmenopausal women are being examined in the Raloxifene Use for the Heart (RUTH) trial in which 10,000 women were randomly assigned to 60 mg of raloxifene or placebo. The primary end point is the incidence of myocardial infarction, but the incidence of breast cancer and osteoporotic fractures will also be examined as secondary outcomes.¹³⁰

Raloxifene After Tamoxifen

Raloxifene does not appear effective for tamoxifen-resistant tumor cells, thus there would seem to be little rationale at present for treating women who have received 5 years of therapeutic or prevention tamoxifen with raloxifene for the purpose of breast cancer risk reduction.^{91,92} Preclinical studies indicate that raloxifene may stimulate endometrial cancer cells previously exposed to tamoxifen, and it has been suggested that administration of raloxifene to women with an intact uterus previously exposed to 5 years of tamoxifen may further increase the risk of endometrial cancer over that observed with tamoxifen alone.⁹¹

Third- and Fourth-Generation SERMs

Arzoxifene is a third-generation SERM of the benzothiophene class (Fig 2), similar in structure to raloxifene, but modified to improve bioavailability and potency.¹³¹ Acolbifene is a fourth-generation SERM of the benzopyrans class. In preclinical models, both drugs are more potent than tamoxifen or raloxifene for inhibiting growth of tamoxifen sensitive tumors.¹³¹⁻¹³⁵ Both agents are able to suppress growth of tumor cells in some tamoxifen-resistant xenograft models. Arzoxifene is able to inhibit growth of tamoxifen resistant MCF-7 cells but not tamoxifen resistant T47-D cells; acolbifene suppresses growth in the tamoxifen

resistant ZR75-1 cell line.¹³⁶⁻¹³⁸ Unlike tamoxifen, acolbifene blocks the stimulatory effect of growth factors on the AF-1 activation site of ER; like tamoxifen, acolbifene also blocks activation of the AF-2 site.^{139,140}

Both arzoxifene and acolbifene have demonstrated activity in metastatic breast cancer. Arzoxifene in doses ranging from 10 to 200 mg/d produced a 19% clinical benefit rate in subjects previously treated with tamoxifen and chemotherapy in a phase I trial.¹⁴¹ Significant reductions in bone turnover markers, LDL and total cholesterol, FSH, and LH were seen beginning at the 10 mg/d dose.¹⁴¹

Response rates of 26% to 43% in women with tamoxifen-sensitive metastatic breast cancer have been reported for arzoxifene at 20 mg/d,^{142,143} with a 10% objective response rate in tamoxifen-resistant patients.¹⁴² Acolbifene in doses of 20 to 40 mg has also undergone phase II testing in 43 women who had previously been exposed to tamoxifen, of whom 22 could be classified as tamoxifen sensitive and 21 as resistant. The overall objective response rate was 18% in tamoxifen-sensitive and 5% in tamoxifen-resistant patients.¹⁴⁴ Both drugs were well tolerated in phase I and II trials with no evidence of uterine hypertrophy. Hot flashes, muscle and bone pain, fatigue, asthenia, and nausea were the most frequent complaints.^{141,142,144}

Preclinical studies of both drugs in ovariectomized rats indicate favorable effects on cholesterol, bone mineral density, and uterine weight, supporting their use as potential prevention agents.^{131,134,145,146} Similar to the situation for raloxifene, preclinical models indicate that arzoxifene may stimulate growth of endometrial cancers arising after prolonged tamoxifen treatment.¹⁴⁷ An increase in uterine thickness was observed in five of 25 previously tamoxifen-exposed women at the 50-mg dose level.¹⁴² Both drugs may be more effective than raloxifene in preventing bone loss.^{146,148} In preclinical models, acolbifene prevented diet and oophorectomy-induced insulin resistance,^{149,150} which has been implicated as a risk factor for postmenopausal breast cancer.¹⁵¹

In the nitrosomethylurea model for breast cancer prevention, arzoxifene was a highly potent chemoprevention agent. It was superior to raloxifene and at least equal to tamoxifen.¹³² Acolbifene has been shown to be effective in preventing breast cancer in the dimethylbenz(a)anthracene rat model.¹³⁴

Arzoxifene has undergone preliminary clinical evaluation as a potential breast cancer chemoprevention drug utilizing the presurgical model.¹⁵² In both phase IA and phase IB trials, decreases in the molar ratio of serum IGF-1:IGFBP-3 and increases in serum SHBG were observed, consistent with favorable modulation of these two risk biomarkers.^{75,76} Reduction in proliferation was noted in the phase IA dose-finding trial at 20 mg/d; however, a significant difference in reduction in proliferation

between placebo versus arzoxifene was not observed in the IB study, perhaps due to the confounding effects of the profound reduction in proliferation associated with stopping hormone replacement therapy between biopsy and re-excision for a sizable proportion of both the arzoxifene and placebo groups.¹⁵² A phase II, placebo-controlled, biomarker modulation study has recently been completed in women at high risk for development of breast cancer. The primary end point is change in breast tissue morphology as assessed by random periareolar fine needle aspiration. A randomized phase III trial of arzoxifene versus placebo has been initiated in postmenopausal women ≥ 60 years of age with prevention of vertebral fractures and breast cancer as two primary end points. Acolbifene has not yet entered clinical prevention trial testing, but reduction in the amount of ER α in rat mammary gland and uterus, as well as in human ZR-75-1 and MCF cells, has been observed in preclinical studies.¹⁵³⁻¹⁵⁵

In summary, both arzoxifene and acolbifene are promising new SERMs for prevention in that they both have some activity in tamoxifen-resistant metastatic breast cancer. Moreover, preclinical studies predict greater preservation of bone mineral density but fewer unfavorable effects on the uterus than with tamoxifen or raloxifene in tamoxifen-naïve women.

Circumventing Resistance to SERMs With Combination Therapy

The partial estrogen agonist profile of tamoxifen and other SERMs may promote the health of other several estrogen responsive organs, but it also may enable the development of resistance via upregulation of the MAP kinase and AKT pathways. Upregulation of these pathways in turn results in an increase in transcriptional activity of coactivators and ER.^{23,136,156-159} Lack of ER α expression, as well as reduction in the level of corepressors, are other potential mechanisms of tamoxifen resistance.³⁵ Combination therapy employing a SERM plus another agent which might reduce MAP kinase and PI-3 kinase signaling would be predicted to reduce the development of tamoxifen-resistant breast cancer.^{160,161}

Approximately 30% of breast cancers are ER α -negative, although $\geq 40\%$ of ER α -negative tumors are ER β -positive.⁹ ER expression may be lost through hypermethylation of the ER promoter, which could theoretically be overcome by combining a histone deacetylase inhibitor with a demethylating agent.¹⁶²⁻¹⁶⁴ Preclinical work has indicated that ER can be re-expressed,^{165,166} but currently available demethylating agents or histone deacetylase inhibitors may have too many side effects for use in the prevention setting.¹⁶⁷⁻¹⁶⁹ Phytoestrogens such as soy may have histone deacetylase inhibitory properties.¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, soy products contain genestein, which has been observed to inhibit HER-2/*neu* activation and pro-

mote apoptosis in breast cancer cell lines.¹⁷¹ An in vitro study by Tanos et al¹⁷² indicated synergistic effects of genestein and tamoxifen on human dysplastic and malignant epithelial cells. On the other hand, genestein blocked the inhibitory effects of tamoxifen on growth in an ovariectomized xenograft model.¹⁷³ The different results of studies involving genestein and other phytoestrogens may in some part be due to differences in dose as well as hormonal environment and timing of exposure.¹⁷⁴⁻¹⁷⁶ The estrogen antagonist effects of phytoestrogens may be mediated via their preferential binding of ER β , which blunts the full agonist effects of ER α .¹⁷⁷⁻¹⁷⁹ The lignan component of flaxseed, another phytoestrogen, may inhibit the PI-3 kinase pathway via inhibition of activation of vascular endothelial growth factor receptor and IGFR.¹⁸⁰⁻¹⁸² Reduced proliferation has been observed with flaxseed in an MDA-MB-435 mouse mammary tumor model.¹⁸⁰ Clinical prevention trials with various phytoestrogens are underway. Pilot trials of combination therapy with phytoestrogens and SERMs should be considered in the future.

Gefitinib is an EGFR tyrosine kinase inhibitor that exhibited only minimal activity in treatment of refractory metastatic breast cancer as a single agent.¹⁸³ However, it has shown activity in the ER-negative HER-2/*neu* transgenic mouse model¹⁸⁴ and was able to restore tamoxifen sensitivity in the MCF-7/HER-2 overexpressing mouse xenograft model.¹⁸⁵ In a placebo-controlled trial using the presurgical model, 14 days of gefitinib significantly reduced proliferation in progesterone receptor-positive DCIS, as well as normal adjacent breast tissue.¹⁸⁶ Although gefitinib will undoubtedly be tested in combination with SERMs and other endocrine agents in women with established breast cancer, concerns regarding the side effect profile (rash, diarrhea, nausea, and lung toxicity) may limit enthusiasm for evaluation in the prevention setting.¹⁸⁷

Breast cancer development is often associated with loss of expression of the tumor suppressor gene retinoic acid receptor beta 2 (*RAR β 2*).¹⁸⁸ Retinoic acid derivatives can induce reexpression of *RAR β* and inhibit signaling mediated through the MAP kinase pathway.¹⁸⁸ A variety of retinoic acid analogues have been found to prevent both ER-positive and ER-negative breast cancer.^{189,190} The retinoic acid analogue fenretinide appeared to have modest activity in preventing contralateral breast cancer in premenopausal women in an Italian adjuvant trial.¹⁹¹ A variety of preclinical studies have suggested enhancement of apoptosis when SERMs are combined with various retinoic acid derivatives.¹⁹²⁻¹⁹⁷ Decensi et al¹⁹⁸ recently reported that fenretinide did not appear to improve risk biomarker modulation over that observed with low-dose tamoxifen alone. The type of SERM and retinoic acid analog may be critical to the success of combination treatment. Suh et al¹⁹² have found that the combination of arzoxifene and a retinoic acid X receptor agonist

LG100268 (a targretin analog) was the most powerful inducer of apoptosis of all SERMs and retinoids tested by that laboratory to date. The mechanism appeared to be a profound induction of TGF β -3.¹⁹⁴ Synergism may also allow lower doses of retinoic acid analogs to be used, which would reduce side effects.^{160,199} Low doses of these two agents were also effective in preventing breast cancer in both ER-positive and ER-negative preclinical models.^{192,194} The increase in apoptosis suggests the combination might be effective in restoring tissue homeostasis following short-term use rather than requiring long-term chronic exposure over years.¹⁶¹

The Future

Another direction in SERM prevention research includes development of highly specific ER β agonists in the hope of avoiding estrogen agonist effects on breast and uterus mediated via ER α , but providing estrogen agonist effects on other organs. Unfortunately, one of the early compounds, ER β -041, was not effective in preventing bone loss or vasomotor instability in ovariectomized animal models, although it did not manifest any estrogenic response in the breast or uterus.²⁰⁰ Development of compounds that do not cross the blood brain barrier might, to some degree, avoid the hot flashes encountered to date with all SERMs. Development of transdermal formulations would avoid a first-pass effect through the liver and theoretically might reduce procoagulant effects ob-

served with SERMs. The development of predictive biomarkers such as those for tamoxifen in the adjuvant setting²⁰¹ might be possible from benign precancerous tissue in the prevention setting as well.

With the continuing development of a strong biologic rationale for selective modulation of specific estrogen receptors, it would appear that there is much promise in the use of SERMs for primary prevention of breast cancer and for women's health.

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The following authors or their immediate family members have indicated a financial interest. No conflict exists for drugs or devices used in a study if they are not being evaluated as part of the investigation. Consultant: Carol J. Fabian, Pfizer, Amgen, AstraZeneca, Sankyo. Honoraria: Carol J. Fabian, Pfizer, Amgen, AstraZeneca, Sankyo. Research Funding: Carol J. Fabian, Pfizer, Novartis; Bruce F. Kimler, Pfizer, Novartis. For a detailed description of these categories, or for more information about ASCO's conflict of interest policy, please refer to the Author Disclosure Declaration and the Disclosures of Potential Conflicts of Interest section of Information for Contributors found in the front of every issue.

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