

Hormone Replacement Therapy

What is Menopause?

Menopause, or climacteric, is the time in a woman's life when menstruation ends and the ovaries produce lower levels of the sex hormones—estrogen and progesterone. Progesterone becomes nearly absent, and estrogen levels are reduced to approximately one-tenth of pre-menopause levels. Menopause usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55, although it varies between individuals. "Surgical menopause," or oophorectomy, occurs when a woman's ovaries are surgically removed.

During menopause, many women experience problems such as hot flashes, night sweats, sleeplessness, mood swings, and vaginal dryness. Bone loss (osteoporosis), angina, and heart attack (coronary artery disease) are also more common in women after menopause.

What Is Hormone Replacement Therapy?

To counter some of the problems often associated with menopause or to prevent some long-term conditions that are more common in postmenopausal women, such as osteoporosis, medical doctors may recommend using hormone replacement therapy (HRT)—for a period from one month to five or more years.¹



HRT usually involves treatment with either estrogen alone or estrogen in combination with progesterone. Progestin, a synthetic hormone with effects similar to those of progesterone, may be used as a substitute. The use of these substances can effectively double hormone levels in post-menopause women, but this therapy does not produce the natural hormone levels seen before menopause.

Do the Benefits of HRT Outweigh the Risks?

Benefits vs. Risks

The best evidence to date for the risks and benefits of HRT comes from the Women's Health Initiative (WHI) study, in which 16,000 healthy women, ages 50 through 79, took either hormones or a placebo—a pill that does not contain the drug under study. The trial was discontinued early in 2002, when investigators reported that the overall risks of estrogen plus progestin outweighed the benefits.²

According to recent studies, HRT with estrogen plus progestin may increase the risk of:

- Dementia, i.e., deterioration of mental abilities resulting in an inability to function, by 50 percent—in women age 65 and older⁶
- Blood clots by 50 percent²
- Stroke by 41 percent²
- Heart disease by 29 percent²
- Breast cancer by 26 percent²

The breast cancers were also slightly larger and more advanced.³ The risk increased with prolonged duration of hormone use and returned to normal five or more years after hormone use was discontinued.⁴

- Death from ovarian cancer from 24.6 to 64 cases—in 100,000 women who used estrogens for 10 or more years.⁷

Benefits of the use of estrogen plus progestin:

- Relief for menopausal symptoms²
- Fewer cases of hip and spine fractures²
- Reduction in the risk of developing colon cancer by 37 percent was reported among women using estrogen plus progestin.² Studies do suggest, however, that to maintain bone density, women must continue taking the hormone.

To date, HRT has not been proven beneficial in older women with pre-existing heart disease.⁵ Additionally, the use of estrogen plus progestin hasn't been shown to affect post-menopausal women's general health, vitality, mental health, depressive symptoms, or sexual satisfaction.⁸

The risks and benefits of estrogen-only therapy, the use of different forms of hormones, including experimentation with lower doses, utilization of different hormone—or different routes of administration—are currently being researched. Safer and more effective therapies may become available in the future.

What
Can You
Do?

Are There Alternative Therapies to HRT?

While hormone therapy can have short-term benefits, many short-term menopause-related symptoms will eventually disappear, and many frequently require no treatment. However, although there are substantial concerns about the use of HRT, it has not been proven beneficial for long-term menopausal problems. If you feel that HRT is not a good choice for you, you may want to consider an alternative approach.

Exercising regularly, eating healthy foods, and not smoking is always good. A healthy lifestyle helps to decrease the risk of bone loss. Health professionals also recommend taking calcium and vitamin D supplements to prevent osteoporosis.⁹ The effect of calcium and vitamin D supplements on hip, spine, and wrist fractures, as well as on colon cancer, is being tested.

Some foods and nutritional supplements can be helpful in reducing the symptoms of menopause:

- Estrogen-containing foods: soy-based products, whole-grain cereals, fruits, and vegetables
- Evening primrose
- Black cohosh
- Dong quai
- Vitamin E

- Vitamin B complex
- Hormone creams

The benefits and risks of most of these agents are not definitively proven, but are being researched.⁹ Before taking any dietary supplement, consult with your health care provider.



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