

# Hormone Replacement Therapy – Is it right for you?

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With the increase in life expectancy, many women are spending more than one third of their lives post-menopause. Menopause occurs when menstrual period stops permanently. The average age at menopause in the U.S. is between 50-52 years.

Menopause is often accompanied by hot flashes, night sweats, mood swings, memory changes, sleeplessness and vaginal problems. The sharp decline of the female hormone ESTROGEN is primarily responsible for the menopausal symptoms as well as increased risk of heart disease, stroke and osteoporosis. Heart disease kills 11 times more women each year than breast cancer and is the leading cause of death in women in the U.S.

## **I. What is Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)?**

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The use of hormone to treat menopausal symptoms and prevent the long-term health risks of menopause is called hormone replacement therapy. Estrogen replacement therapy (ERT) and combined estrogen-progesterone replacement therapy (CHRT) are most commonly prescribed. The addition of progesterone protects against endometrial cancer and is usually given to women who have not had a hysterectomy (surgical removal of the uterus).

## **II. Forms of HRT**

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The hormone estrogen and progesterone are available in both “natural” and “synthetic” forms. They may be taken in many ways—pills, vaginal creams, skin patches, intra-uterine devices, implants, or injections. If you are on the combined therapy, you may select the cyclic or continuous schedule. With the cyclic schedule, you take estrogen and progesterone for a set number of days each month. Women on cyclic therapy usually experience monthly bleeding. With the continuous schedule, both estrogen and progesterone are taken together daily (now available in a single pill). Most women on continuous therapy stop bleeding after about 6-12 months of treatment.

## **III. Side Effects of HRT**

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- Breast tenderness
- Vaginal bleeding
- Headaches
- Nausea
- Water retention
- Bloating

## **IV. Benefits of HRT**

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- Reduced menopausal symptoms
- Decreased bone loss and fractures
- Decreased effects of aging on the skin and urinary sphincter muscles
- Decreased risk of colorectal cancer

## **V. Risks of HRT**

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- Increased lifetime risk of developing breast cancer when used for more than 5 years. However, death rate from breast cancer in HRT users is lower than non-HRT users
- Increased risk of uterine cancer (if used without progesterone)
- Increased risk of blood clots
- Increased risk of gall bladder disease (mainly with estrogen pills)
- Increased risk of stroke and heart disease (if used for more than 5 years)

## **VI. Factors to consider before starting HRT**

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- Severity of menopausal symptoms
- Your medical history - HRT may not be suitable for you if you have a personal history of breast cancer, uterine cancer, uterine fibroids, heart or circulation problems, blood clots, liver or gall bladder disease, or stroke.
- Your family history (particularly breast or uterine cancer)
- Your risk of heart disease or stroke
- Your risk of osteoporosis

## **VII. Alternatives to HRT**

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Some women may choose not to take HRT because of potential health risks and side effects from long-term use. The following lifestyle changes can help lower your risk of heart disease and osteoporosis:

- Stop smoking
- Include regular aerobic exercise and weight bearing exercise (e.g. walking, working out with weights)
- Eat a diet high in fiber, calcium, and soy products; low in saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium
- Maintain a healthy body weight

You may also consider medication to lower your cholesterol level and increase bone mass if necessary.

Your decision to take hormone replacement therapy or not is a highly personal one, and should take into account your symptoms, medical and family history, the benefits and risks. All women, especially those on HRT, should undergo regular medical check ups, perform monthly breast self-exam, and have a yearly mammogram and clinical breast exam beginning at age 40 for early detection of breast cancer.

Be sure to discuss with your primary care doctor or gynecologist to see if HRT is right for you.

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