



AMERICAN COLLEGE OF  
OBSTETRICIANS AND  
GYNECOLOGISTS

## Hormone Therapy

At menopause, a woman's body makes less estrogen and she stops having menstrual periods. This is a natural stage in a woman's life. The lack of estrogen can bring on symptoms such as hot flashes and vaginal dryness. It also can increase the risk of osteoporosis (bone loss).

### Your Body's Hormones

Hormones are substances that control when and how certain organs work. They are made by glands in the body, but also can be made in a lab.

Androgens, so-called male hormones, are made by the ovaries (two glands on either side of the uterus) in women and by the testes in men. In women, androgens are used by the ovaries to make estrogen, the so-called female hormone. The ovaries make estrogen from puberty until menopause.

The amount of estrogen produced by the ovaries decreases as a woman ages. At some point, the ovaries stop making enough estrogen to thicken the uterine lining. This is when the menstrual periods stop and menopause occurs. The average age when a woman has her last menstrual period is 51 years, but the normal range is from ages 45 to 55 years.

When a woman chooses to take hormone therapy, her options depend on whether she has had her uterus removed. A woman who has had her uterus removed can take just estrogen.

### Uses of Hormone Therapy

Hormone therapy can help relieve the symptoms of low estrogen levels (hot flashes and vaginal dryness) and decrease the risk of osteoporosis. The decision to take hormone therapy depends on your personal needs.

### Concerns and Risks

Like most treatments, hormone therapy is not free of risk. Using a progestin seems to increase the risk for breast cancer. Also, monthly bleeding may resume. Although bleeding may occur for only a short time, many women do not want to have menstrual cycles at all and may find this side effect bothersome.

Findings of the Women's Health Initiative, a study by the National Institutes of Health, raised concerns about the risks of hormones for postmenopausal women. The study results suggest that the increased risk of health problems from hormone therapy may vary from woman to woman depending on how far a woman is past menopause.

A woman should take the smallest dose of hormone therapy that works for her, for the shortest possible time.

### Treatment

When they choose to take hormone therapy, most women who have a uterus take estrogen and a progestin. The amount of each hormone needed to prevent symptoms varies from person to person. Over time, changes in the dose may be needed.

Hormone therapy can be given in many ways.

- Cyclic therapy
- Combined therapy
- Estrogen only therapy

### **Other Options**

Some women concerned about hormone therapy may try other options, such as antidepressants, herbal products, or bioidentical hormones, to relieve symptoms of menopause. For many of these products there are limited facts available.

### **Follow-up**

When taking hormone therapy or other medications, you should follow your doctor's advice carefully and get regular checkups. Let your doctor know if you have any unexpected vaginal bleeding.

### **Finally...**

Hormone therapy can help relieve some of the symptoms that affect women at menopause. Before making a decision about hormone therapy, talk to your doctor about what may work best for you based on your personal needs and family and medical history.

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