

MENOPAUSE, HEART DISEASE AND HORMONE REPLACEMENT THERAPY



An estimated 80 million women are approaching or going through menopause, which occurs after the menstrual periods have stopped for 12 consecutive months. Perimenopause, the period of transition to menopause, generally starts 3 to 5 years prior to the final menstruation period. During perimenopause estrogen levels begin to decrease. The lack of estrogen affects women differently. Some women experience very few symptoms, while others report hot flashes, night sweats, sleep deprivation, moodiness or other physical and psychological symptoms. Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is a treatment widely used to decrease these symptoms. HRT does have beneficial effects.

Over the years, menopause has been linked to other potentially serious health conditions including osteoporosis, vision problems, colon cancer, Alzheimer's disease and heart disease..

Women's Health Initiative (WHI)

The WHI followed more than 16,000 healthy postmenopausal women (aged 50-70) from various ethnic backgrounds. The study investigated the long-term benefits and risks of estrogen plus progestin or estrogen alone for women after a hysterectomy. Researchers thought that HRT would decrease the risks of stroke and heart attack, while benefiting the treatment and prevention of bone disease, osteoporosis.

The Estrogen/Progesterone component of the study was stopped a little over five years because the risks far outweighed the benefits. The risks each year for every 10,000 women were:

- 8 more strokes
- 7 more heart attacks
- 8 more cases of breast cancer
- 18 more cases of blood clots
- 23 more cases of dementia (women aged 65 and older)

The study results apply to a large number of women. For an individual woman, the increased risk of disease is quite small. For an individual woman prescribed the combination of HRT, the increased risk of breast cancer was less than one-tenth of 1 percent each year.

The study also found a benefit for colorectal cancers and hip fractures. However, the study cautioned women that HRT does not prevent or treat colorectal cancer or hip fractures. The benefits shown from the study for each year for every 10,000 women were:

- 6 fewer colorectal cancers
- 5 fewer hip fractures.

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The research is still following the women in the estrogen-only (ERT) study group and then has not found an increase in breast cancer, heart attacks, strokes or blood clots. As a result, many questions are raised about how to proceed with post-menopausal women who are already on HRT and whether or not to start hormone therapy at all in women facing menopause. Each woman facing this decision should have honest and open communication with her health care provider, weighing individual potential benefits vs. potential risks. The decision is highly individual and should be made after careful consideration of these facts.

GUIDELINES FOR WOMEN

- HRT **should not** be prescribed to prevent heart attacks or osteoporosis.
- Talk with your health care provider about lifestyle changes and medications. The benefits of healthy lifestyle choices are well documented and still recommended: a diet low in saturated fats and high in fruits, vegetables and whole grains, adequate calcium, regular exercise, healthy weight and smoking cessation.
- If HRT is used to relieve menopausal symptoms, it should be used for the shortest duration based on individual treatment goals and risks.
- Talk with your health care provider regularly. Your risks or other conditions may change and safer, more effective treatments may become available.
- Estrogen-only therapy will not prevent heart attacks in women with heart disease.

SUGGESTIONS FOR EVERYDAY RELIEF

- Wear layered clothing that can be removed or added as needed
- Keep sleeping area cool with air conditioning and/or fan
- Maintain a cool ambient air temperature in home and office environment
- Drink eight to ten 8-oz glasses of water per day
- Avoid hot and spicy food and beverages, caffeine, and alcohol
- Practice relaxation techniques such as deep, slow breathing when you feel a hot flash coming on
- Try over-the-counter vaginal lubricants and moisturizers for vaginal dryness
- Discontinue smoking
- Eat a healthy diet
- Maintain a steady, healthy weight
- Get adequate exercise by routinely walking, swimming, or other activity for 30-minutes per day.
- Reduce emotional stress.