



ARTICLES

Hormones, Now What? Answers to the Recent Hormone Confusion

by Donna Ragsdale, ND

Hormones are very powerful as are the symptoms associated with hormone imbalance. Symptoms can affect women, and men, on an emotional level as well as physiological level. Once women understand that problems stem from underlying hormonal imbalance, they are relieved, especially when they find hormonal imbalances can be easily corrected with natural hormones.

If women were confused about hormones and HRT (Hormone Replacement Therapy) before, after all the information in the news on July 9, I can imagine there is major confusion. First, let me explain the news events. The Women's Health Initiative was conducting a study on HRT. They wanted to determine the best ways to prevent heart disease, breast and colorectal cancer, and osteoporosis. The study was initiated in 1991 and was supposed to continue until 2005. The HRT used in the study was Prempro, which is Premarin, estrogen made from pregnant mare's urine, and synthetic progestin. However, the U.S. government abruptly halted the study three years ahead of schedule. Why such an extreme measure? Here is why. Among the women participating in the study there was an increased risk of: breast cancer by 26%, heart disease by 23%, stroke by 38%, and blood clots by 100%. Once source told me that 41% of women starting the study dropped out early due to initial side effects. Prior to the release of this information, compliance of women on HRT was low. Some statistics show as many as 30% of women never fill their prescriptions, 20% stop within 9 months, 20% are on them after 3 years, and 10% use them intermittently.

Many people are still unaware that last year, in July, the American Heart Association publicly stated that they no longer support the use of HRT for the sole prevention of heart disease. Numerous studies have demonstrated the increased risk of breast cancer associated with HRT. Recently, a study in the Journal of the American Medical Association - Jan. 1999, stated that they found, for every year of use on Premarin and Provera, the breast cancer risk is 8%. So if a woman is on HRT for 5 years, her risk could be 40%. This is just the tip of the iceberg for the potential risks found in research studies. As a Naturopathic doctor specializing in Bio-identical Hormone Replacement Therapy and hormone balancing from a complementary medical perspective, I am excited that what we have been saying for years regarding the dangers of HRT is being validated. Women need to know the side effects and risks. They also need to know that there are other options.

Perhaps the most dangerous component of the HRT tested in this study is the synthetic progestin. We found out years ago that synthetic progestin causes weight gain, migraines, mood swings, depression, irritability, fluid retention, decreases HDL (good cholesterol), and has been associated with metabolic and vascular side effects (suppression of the vasodilation effects of estrogens), and promotes arteriosclerosis. The synthetic progestins reduce the diameter of the arteries to the heart thereby reducing blood flow to the heart. **Be advised: birth control pills are synthetic progestin.**

The most important thing that must be stressed is that this study and the majority of others were done on synthetic hormone replacement therapy and not on bio-identical (natural) hormones. Technically, Premarin is a natural hormone if you consider estrogen made from horse urine natural. However, it is not equivalent to a woman's estrogen at all. Side effects, from the Physician's Desk Reference, on Premarin include; hair loss, autoimmune disorders, arthritis, thyroid disease, fluid retention, irritability, breast problems, high blood pressure, weight gain, progesterone/estrogen imbalance, nausea, 2.5 fold increase risk of gall bladder disease, yeast infection, 46% greater risk of stroke, and 4-8 times greater risk of uterine cancer.

With all the very frightening risks associated HRT, what can women do with the sometimes very intense symptoms associated with menopause, perimenopause, and PMS? What about long term prevention of heart disease, bone loss, brain function, anti-aging benefits and skin quality?

In this time of uncertainty with HRT, you will begin to hear more about the amazing results women are getting with natural hormones. Technically, they are called bio-identical hormones. This is because they have the same exact molecular structure as real ovarian-produced hormones. Women's bodies produce these in significant amounts starting at puberty. They are plant derived, meaning components from plants are taken into the lab and converted to an exact match of human female estrogens, progesterone, testosterone, and DHEA. Bio-identical Hormone Replacement Therapy (BHRT) has been used in Europe sixty years without increased risk of breast cancer or cardiovascular events. A twenty year long study by Johns Hopkins University Medical School found that half of all breast cancers could be prevented by having a normal level of progesterone. The study did not say synthetic progestin!

I attended a symposium on BHRT following the breaking news on the side effects of traditional HRT. One of the country's leading breast cancer researchers, David Zava, PhD, author of What Your Doctor May Not Tell You About Breast Cancer, made several in-depth presentations and predicted that 80 to 90% of breast cancers can be prevented by using bio-identical (natural) progesterone.

BHRT and hormone balancing involves determining which hormones are out of balance. This is done with symptom assessment profile and saliva testing to confirm hormonal levels. Saliva testing is now recognized as more accurate than blood testing to check bio-available hormone levels. Close monitoring is essential to ensure that appropriate dosages and programs are given. When the imbalances are treated with the right customized hormones based on individual need, personalized supplement programs, applicable dietary changes, stress reduction and exercise, symptoms can be eliminated. Perhaps most importantly, the risks associated synthetic replacement therapy and long term health risks like bone loss, heart disease and cancer can be addressed.

As a clinician and consultant, I believe that patient education is vital. I have discovered that very few women understand the properties of hormones and their effects on the body. I have dedicated untold hours conducting seminars to women and practitioners to help educate others regarding hormonal imbalance and safe, effective protocols to achieve hormonal balance. The naturopathic approach I use to address menopause, PMS, and perimenopause, includes customized, appropriate, individualized doses of bio-identical replacements, especially for the client. One dose does not fit all. Complementary therapies also include nutritional supplements, addressing other related health issues, lifestyle changes, and dietary approaches.

In order to help you recognize some common symptoms associated with hormonal imbalance let us address each of the three primary hormones separately, starting with progesterone. Progesterone decreases 75% from ages 35 to 50. Women deficient in progesterone often have Fibrocystic Breast Disease, poor sleep, painful or heavy periods, PMS, perimenopausal symptoms, headaches, migraines, irritability, anxiety, osteoporosis, endometriosis, uterine fibroids, water retention, weight gain, acne, irregular periods, miscarriage, and infertility. On an emotional level, women deficient in progesterone are more stressed, irritable, have more mood swings and anxiety. When progesterone levels are restored, preferably through topical application, most women report resolution of the above listed symptoms within a few days to four to six weeks. Topical progesterone is available over-the-counter. My recommendation is a topical progesterone that has a delivery system and is sustained released (Endocrema Serum 900 in a brand that has been tested by a medical university, and I have had excellent and dependable results with this product.) Topical progesterone is available at local nutrition stores (or from Marco Industries, 800-726-1612).

If a woman is deficient in estrogen, which typically drops 30 to 60% by age 50, she may experience hot flashes, night sweats, depression, vaginal dryness, and poor concentration or memory, to name a few common symptoms. An estrogen deficient woman can tend to be more emotional, more depressed or weepy. Bio-identical replacement with estrogens can be very effective.

A woman's body actually makes several estrogens. The three principal estrogens are estradiol, estrone, and estriol. Traditional Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) does not include estriol. It is considered the "anticancer" estrogen, possibly helping to protect against breast cancer. These are compounded by a pharmacist based on specific amounts a woman needs to re-establish a normal physiologic balance.

Estrogen should never be taken without progesterone in any case. The traditional approach is to give estrogen without progesterone to women that no longer have a uterus. Now that so many benefits of progesterone have been clearly identified, this practice will soon be stopped. Post-hysterectomy women still need the breast protection progesterone offers along with the bone building capabilities.

Women also need testosterone for the heart, brain, bones, and other tissues. If a woman's level falls too low, she may experience loss of libido, angina, vaginal dryness, loss of muscle tone and osteoporosis. She may feel depressed or unmotivated. If levels of testosterone are too high, symptoms could be acne/oily skin, excessive facial hair, ovarian cysts or thinning scalp hair. Excessive testosterone can cause a woman to feel angry, irritable, or overly aggressive.

Many of my patients express their challenge with mental acuity around menopause. They say they just are not as "sharp" as they used to be and hope their bosses do not pass them by for a promotion. What could be more embarrassing than fanning yourself or wiping sweat from those intense hot flashes right in the middle of business meeting or church? Many women come in to see me because their husbands or co-workers always seem to be able to point out what time of month it is by their mood swings. One of the biggest challenges women deal with is weight, many times as the result of taking traditional or synthetic hormones. In this case, it does not matter how many times a week you go to the gym.

Here are a few examples of results I have attained in my practice by using bio-identical (natural) hormones and complementary therapies:

- H.S. came in with mental fuzziness, low energy, and vaginal dryness. On her second visit she said, "There has been such a change in the way I feel. I was not losing my mind, it was all hormonal. It is such a relief to understand what was going on." She now has more energy and is thinking much more clearly.
- R.M. came in complaining of regular monthly migraines and some PMS. Six weeks later upon follow up she states, "I'm telling everyone with migraines! I am so thrilled, this is the first time in many years I have been headache free."
- A.D. presented with symptoms of hot flashes, fatigue, and mental fuzziness. After adding natural hormones, she stated 6 weeks later, "I am greatly improved. I can't believe the difference." Her energy level has improved as well.
- J.C. found that after switching from a synthetic estrogen to natural hormones she has more energy and has lost 13 lbs. two weeks. She no longer has breast swelling or water retention.
- C.A. was perimenopausal when she came in for a consultation. Her periods were irregular and she had breast swelling prior to her periods, along with other typical PMS symptoms. All she needed was a few supplements, and some natural progesterone. She now has lost 12 lbs.

I have had the privilege of watching BHRT and other natural therapies change lives of women and their families, transform their health, and improve their quality of life. This option of using natural therapies allows women to actively take part in their own healthcare by choosing a noninvasive, more nurturing approach. By having this choice, women work in concert with a qualified practitioner and with their own bodies to find a balance of wellness for themselves.

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