

Should You Take Hormone Replacement Therapy?

What is Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)?

Hormone replacement therapy, often called HRT, replaces hormones produced naturally before menopause. It has been used in the past to:

- relieve symptoms of menopause
- help prevent heart disease
- help prevent osteoporosis (thinning bones that can lead to hip and other bone fractures).

The use of HRT is approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and has been used for many years. HRT has been prescribed for both short- and long-term use.

Estrogen and medroxyprogesterone, a form of progesterone, are two commonly used hormones in HRT. Women with a uterus often take a combination of the two hormones. Women without a uterus often take estrogen alone.

As with any medicine, there are both benefits and risks to HRT. Recent National Institutes of Health (NIH) studies have more clearly identified some of the risks associated with long-term use of HRT. No harm has been shown from short-term use. But results of the long-term use studies may change how HRT is used in the future.

Results of the NIH Studies

- **Using combination HRT (estrogen and medroxyprogesterone) is not effective for long-term prevention of heart disease.**
 - Women taking the two drugs for at least 5 years are at increased risk of breast cancer, heart attacks, strokes and lung or leg blood clots.
- **Both estrogen-only HRT and combination HRT do reduce the risk of hip and bone fractures.**
 - Combination HRT also reduces the risk of colon cancer.
 - Long-term use of combination HRT carries serious risks.
- **HRT does help reduce the symptoms of menopause.**
 - The risks and benefits of short-term use of HRT are not known at this time.
 - Long-term use of both estrogen-only HRT and combination HRT increases the risk of heart disease and certain cancers.

In addition to the NIH studies, another HRT study reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that women who take estrogen-only HRT for at least 10 years are at increased risk of ovarian cancer.

Alternatives to HRT

Your health care provider can suggest alternatives to HRT. For example, he or she may suggest lowering your blood pressure or blood cholesterol levels and losing weight as a way to help prevent heart disease. To reduce the risk of bone fractures, your provider may suggest taking medicines that prevent osteoporosis or doing weight-bearing exercises.

Deciding About HRT

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists Task Force on Hormone Replacement Therapy recommends that a decision about HRT be based on a personal discussion between a woman and her provider, based on her specific circumstances.

If you have been thinking about taking HRT to help relieve menopause symptoms or reduce your risk of bone fractures, talk with your provider. He or she can help you sort out the benefits and risks of HRT and help you determine what is the best decision for you.

If you are currently taking HRT, don't become alarmed by study results. Talk with your health care provider about if you should continue taking HRT. Don't stop taking HRT without first talking with your health care provider.