

# Not Your Mother's Hormone Replacement Therapy

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A large part of my private practice involves helping women as they go through perimenopause and enter menopause. This is a transition that all women go through and is a natural part of life. However, with women's life expectancy at a historical high, a woman may live a third to half of her life in menopause. And many women are entering menopause even earlier, due to surgeries, chemotherapy, autoimmune diseases and for unknown reasons. Hormone replacement therapy can be a useful tool to prevent disease and manage symptoms in the perimenopausal and menopausal woman.

Before we go further, let's make sure we're on the same page with our terms. **Premenopause** refers to the time in a woman's life from her first menses to when her cycles begin to be irregular before menopause. **Perimenopause** reflects the time when hormonal changes are starting. This phase can start as early as ten years prior to menopause and be more or less symptomatic. Menses are still occurring in perimenopause and can be irregular. This phase exists until 12 months after your last menses. **Menopause or postmenopause** refers to all of the time in a woman's life after perimenopause, from 12 months after the last cycle. The average age of menopause is 51 years. Women entering menopause prior to age 45 are considered to be in **early menopause** and prior to age 40 are considered **premature menopause**.

We know that women may experience symptoms during perimenopause and menopause with the classic symptom being hot flashes. They might also experience irregular menses, sleep issues, fatigue, difficulty thinking, migraines, mood swings, sexual dysfunction, muscle and joint pain, urinary tract infections and weight gain. Additionally, women's risks of certain diseases increases after menopause, particularly heart disease and osteoporosis. Rates of cardiovascular disease in women are much lower than men's until after menopause, when our rates of heart disease

equal men's. In fact, heart disease is the leading cause of death in women. Osteoporosis risk also increases dramatically after menopause with a rapid decrease in bone mineral density in the first five years after menopause.

Living for many years with lower production of hormones may not be problematic for many women, but fear and misunderstanding about hormone replacement therapy can prevent women from getting the help they need to practice smart, preventive medicine and to manage symptoms. This fear started in 2002 when the Women's Healthcare Initiative (WHI) was discontinued and headlines raged about increasing risk of heart disease from using hormones. But science doesn't stop with a single study. New studies have refined the data and the newest practice guidelines support the use of hormone replacement therapy. Even reviewing data from the WHI shows that the risk of coronary heart disease was reduced when modern practice guidelines are applied. The new guidelines indicate that risk may be reduced if estrogen therapy is begun before the age of 60 or within 10 years of menopause.

That doesn't mean that all women should start hormone replacement therapy immediately after their first hot flash. It means hormone therapy is one safe and effective tool that we may apply. Naturopathic physicians practice individualized medicine, so we evaluate your symptoms and risk factors and provide you with the treatments that are most likely to help and least likely to harm you. We can also apply other approaches such as lifestyle medicine, nutrition, herbal therapy and acupuncture. Should we elect to use hormone replacement therapy, we have many options available. More often than not, I am using bioidentical hormone replacement



therapy, meaning the hormones have the same molecular structure as those your body makes.

I recommend that all women entering perimenopause consult with their health care team to evaluate risk factors, discuss symptoms and plan for future evaluation and possible treatment options. I encourage women experiencing vaginal symptoms, pain with sexual activity or urinary tract infections to discuss these symptoms in the context of local hormone replacement therapy as a safe and effective treatment to improve the health of these tissues. Women in early or premature menopause should discuss hormone replacement therapy earlier rather than later as a preventive medicine strategy. If you are having symptoms or have questions about hormone replacement therapy, the naturopathic physicians at True Health Medicine are a resource for help.



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