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Loss of Estrogen a Risk Factor for Disc Degeneration and Lower Back Pain

New study links menopause to lumbar disc degeneration and suggests benefits of hormone therapy

CLEVELAND, Ohio (June 14, 2017)—“Oh, my aching back!” It’s not an uncommon complaint heard from both men and women as they age and experience lumbar disc degeneration. Now a new study out of China suggests that menopause is associated with severity of disc degeneration in the lumbar spine. The study outcomes are being published in an article available online today in *Menopause*, the journal of The North American Menopause Society (NAMS).

Available evidence strongly supports the involvement of estrogen deficiency in disc degeneration, as well as the benefits of hormone therapy (HT) on the total lumbar disc height in postmenopausal women. Multiple studies have previously investigated the association between menopause and lumbar disc degeneration; however, the study detailed in the article “Association between menopause and lumbar disc degeneration: an MRI study of 1,566 women and 1,382 men” is the first known to include a portion of age-matched men as a comparison group.

Study results document how men and women fare with regard to disc degeneration, as measured by magnetic resonance imaging, as they age. Whereas young, age-matched men were more susceptible to disc degeneration than premenopausal women were, postmenopausal women had a significant tendency to develop more severe disc degeneration than age-matched men compared with premenopausal and perimenopausal women. The most dramatic difference was seen in the first 15 years after menopause onset, although the authors note that further studies are needed to determine whether age or menopause plays a more important role in the progression of disc degeneration in the lumbar spine.

“This study shows that menopause is associated with more severe disc degeneration,” says Dr. JoAnn Pinkerton, executive director of NAMS. “Prevention of disc degeneration of the lumbar spine may be another potential benefit for symptomatic menopausal women who may be candidates for hormone therapy.”

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Founded in 1989, The North American Menopause Society (NAMS) is North America’s leading nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the health and quality of life of all women during midlife and beyond through an understanding of menopause and healthy aging. Its multidisciplinary membership of 2,000 leaders in the field—including clinical and basic science experts from medicine, nursing, sociology, psychology, nutrition, anthropology, epidemiology, pharmacy, and education—makes NAMS uniquely qualified to serve as the definitive resource for health professionals and the public for accurate, unbiased information about menopause and healthy aging. To learn more about NAMS, visit www.menopause.org.