

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT Hormone Therapy Health Risks and Benefits

Vaginal dryness and hot flashes that result from lower levels of estrogen frustrate many postmenopausal women. Vaginal dryness can prevent women from enjoying sexual intimacy, and hot flashes can simply disrupt everyday lives. Although some women are good candidates for hormone therapy (HT), they are unsure about taking it because they've heard that HT is associated with health risks.

Are there health risks associated with HT?

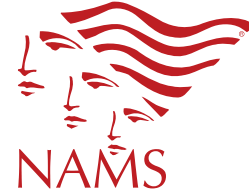
In the 1960s, estrogen therapy was considered the fountain of youth. By the 1970s, there were reports that the use of estrogen alone could lead to endometrial cancer, thrombosis, and hypertension. Researchers found that adding progestogens to the estrogen could prevent endometrial cancer. By the 1990s, it was believed that HT offered many health benefits, including prevention of heart disease and osteoporosis. However, data from a major heart study later showed an increased risk of cerebrovascular disease. The data were conflicting, and the medical community wasn't sure what to believe.

What was the Women's Health Initiative?

To settle the question about the use of HT for preventing certain conditions associated with aging, the National Institutes of Health launched the Women's Health Initiative in 1993 to study hormone effects. Researchers were expecting to find that hormones prevented the chronic conditions of aging in women but were startled to find that the trials not only failed to find cardioprotective effects of menopausal HT, reports showed a small but significant increase in cardiac events as well as a higher incidence of breast cancer. However, as more data emerge from the trials, reanalysis is showing that the risks of HT vary with a woman's age and that HT is more beneficial for younger women who begin HT sooner rather than later. Other trials under way studying HT effects in woman who begin therapy earlier are showing reassuring early results.

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With these risks, why should anyone use HT?

For many women, the benefits of HT outweigh the risks. *Systemic HT* (absorbed into the blood) helps hot flashes, vaginal dryness, night sweats, and osteoporosis. It can protect your bones and lower the risk of type 2 diabetes. It can even help with mood and memory. *Local low-dose estrogens* (applied directly into the vagina) treat vaginal symptoms such as dryness and pain with sex. Women should use the lowest dose that successfully treats their symptoms.

How can I decide?

Discuss your concerns with your healthcare provider. Many factors, including your preferences and even cost, come into play when deciding whether to use hormones for symptom relief. A woman is a good candidate for HT if she

- Is close to menopause (typically, ages 50-59)
- Is in good health
- Does not have certain health conditions such as cancer, liver disease, unexplained uterine bleeding, or a history of blood clots or cardiovascular disease that may increase the risks

Where can I find more information on the risks and benefits of HT?

Information about the safety of HT can be found in The North American Menopause Society's *The Menopause Guidebook*, 7th edition, as well as on their website at www.menopause.org/for-women/menopauseflashes/news-you-can-use-about-hormone-therapy.

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