

Guide: What is Hormone Therapy?

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Hormone therapy

Hormone therapy (HRT) replaces the female hormones your body stops making in menopause. There may be some increased health risks with hormone therapy, depending on the type of treatment and how long you are on it. There are also benefits. Whether the benefits outweigh the risks depends on your body.

What is it?

Hormone replacement focuses on estrogen. You take a synthetic form of the estrogen your body used to make, usually as a pill, patch, or cream.

How can it help me?

Hormone therapy is proven to help with

- Vaginal dryness
- Painful sex from shrinking vaginal tissues
- Urinary problems like frequency or incontinence—not being able to hold your pee
- Hot flashes
- Bone density loss (Osteoporosis)

Who's it for?

- People who are going through menopause and have bothersome symptoms.
- People who have gone through menopause and have bone loss, especially if they can't tolerate other medications.
- People who have lost their estrogen because of having their ovaries removed or because of chemotherapy.
- People who have gone through early menopause—before age 45.

If you lose your estrogen-making abilities earlier in life, hormone replacement can lower your risk of health problems, including heart disease, stroke, mood swings, and dementia.

What kinds are there?

There are two main kinds of HRT—systemic and localized.

You can take systemic therapy—a pill, skin patch, ring, or injection—to affect the level of hormones throughout your whole body. Systemic treatment is best for treating problems like hot flashes and bone loss.

Localized therapy is usually in the form of a vaginal gel or cream. It only affects the tissues of your vagina. Localized therapy best treats problems like urinary incontinence, urgency, vaginal dryness, and painful sex.

Are there risks?

Estrogen replacement may lead to a higher risk of:

- Stroke
- Heart Disease
- Blood Clots
- Breast Cancer
- Ovarian Cancer
- Endometrial Cancer

If you have a uterus, taking progesterone or progestin along with estrogen can help combat the increased risk of endometrial cancer.

Is the risk the same for everyone?

The risk of getting these conditions on hormone therapy is different for everyone. The benefits could outweigh the risks if you're healthy.

- Systemic therapy carries more risk than localized therapy
- If you start HRT after age 60, your chance of health problems is greater
- If you begin before age 60 and less than 10 years after the end of menopause, your risk is lower.
- The risk is much higher if you are a smoker.
- HRT might not be right for you if you're at increased risk of getting cancer because of family history or genetics.

How do I talk about it?

A few ways to talk to your:

Doctor

"I was wondering if hormone replacement could help with my hot flashes."

"Could hormone replacement be a good option for me, considering my health history?"

"Am I at high risk for any health problems that could get worse with hormone therapy?"

“What are some ways I can prevent bone loss? Is hormone therapy a good option?”

Partner

“I want to try hormone replacement to help with some of my symptoms, but there are some risks. Can you help me think through if it is worth trying?”

“I know I have been acting differently lately. My mood has been all over the place. I am hoping that hormone replacement could help, but there are risks. What do you think?”

Takeaways

Let's look back at a few key takeaways.

- Hormone replacement therapy replaces hormones your body stops making in menopause or because of surgery or chemotherapy.
- Hormone therapy has proven benefits but also some risks.
- If you have problems with bone loss, hot flashes, night sweats, vaginal dryness, or painful sex, hormone replacement might help you.
- Some risks with hormone therapy are a higher chance of getting breast, ovarian, and endometrial cancer, heart disease, blood clots, and strokes.
- The risk is different for everyone. Family history, health, age, and whether you smoke also make a difference.
- Localized Hormones—meaning only in one place on your body--have less risk.
- Talking to your doctor can help you understand your situation and decide if hormone replacement is a good option.

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Did You Know: A significant trial published in 2002 pointed to the increased risks of certain cancers with HRT. More recent studies have questioned if these results were overestimated.