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**Hormone Replacement Therapy And Breast Cancer**

**By Patricia T. Kelly, Ph. D.**

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**HORMONE REPLACEMENT THERAPY AND BREAST CANCER:  
THE RISKS IN PERSPECTIVE**

Janet M., a fifties-something woman, entered my office and said as she sat down, "I've read that if I take hormones I'll increase my breast cancer risk. I'm going crazy without sleep and with these mood swings, but I don't want to increase my breast cancer risk by taking hormones."

Like many women, Janet had heard that a recent study, the Women's Health Initiative (WHI), definitively showed that hormone replacement therapy (HRT) increases breast cancer risk. Janet, like most people, didn't realize that this study found no statistically significant increase in breast cancer risk to women who took HRT.

When differences are not significant, an increase in risk may well be due to other factors, not the one being studied, such as HRT use. As often happens when a medical story is reported, the emphasis was on the increase in risk, not whether the increase was likely to be due to the agent being studied or to the size of the risk.

The actual size of a risk is important in any woman's decision making process. In this case the risk was exceedingly

## Hormone Replacement Therapy And Breast Cancer

small — only 8 in 10,000 women a year — which is 0.08% or eight hundredths of one percent! Janet was amazed to learn the actual size of the increase, and said, "You mean I was getting all concerned for a risk that small!"

"And," I pointed out, "even this very small difference in risk may not be due to hormone use." I explained that breast cancers take an average of eight years to reach about half an inch in size. This means that breast cancers started in the first year of the study would not be detected for eight or more years. The study followed women for only about five years, so all or most of the breast cancers found were probably present in an

undetected state before the study began.

Janet asked if HRT use might have caused some breast cancers to grow more rapidly and therefore be detected sooner than eight years. This is unlikely. A number of studies find that breast cancers in women who were using HRT were not larger and were not dividing more rapidly than breast cancers in non hormone users. Since breast cancers grow more slowly in older women and the average age in this study was 63, breast cancers in this group would tend to grow more slowly and so take even longer than the eight year average to be detected.

Women in the WHI study used a particular type of hormone Prempro. The results of this study therefore do not apply to other, newer approaches in which more natural hormones are used and a woman's menstrual cycle is more closely approximated.

Janet was surprised to learn that many studies find that women who use HRT do not have an increase in breast cancer risk compared to women who don't use hormones, even when hormones are used for twenty years. Also, in another large study in which some women were assigned to take Prempro and others not, women who used Prempro had no significant increase in breast cancer risk.

As Janet left, she said, "I can see now that when I hear about a study I need to know how big a risk is and not just that it is increased. I'll also ask how long a study it was. This discussion has given me a whole different perspective."

Understand and manage your cancer risk. Visit <http://www.ptkelly.com> and sign up for our free teleforum.

Patricia T. Kelly, Ph.D. is a medical geneticist who specializes in providing information about cancer risk to individuals and health professionals. She is affiliated with Saint Francis Memorial Hospital in San Francisco. Information about her book, *Assess Your True Risk of Breast Cancer*, can be found on her web site: <http://www.ptkelly.com>.

Dr. Kelly is a medical geneticist who has been a Diplomate of the American Board of Medical Genetics since 1982. In 1993 she became a Founding Fellow of the American College of Medical Genetics. She received her Ph.D. in genetics from the University of California, Berkeley.

### **Hormone Replacement Therapy To Alleviate Menopausal Symptoms**

**By David Sanders**

If you have not yet experienced menopause then the terms hormone replacement therapy may sound foreign to you. As the terms suggest, HRT or hormone replacement therapy is a treatment aimed at easing the symptoms of menopause by hormonal replacement.

Menopause is that period in a woman's life when the body is in the process of changing and these changes are manifested through various symptoms like hot flushes, mood changes, depression, insomnia and night sweating.

A woman in menopausal stage can opt for hormonal replacement therapy if she wants to alleviate the many symptoms of menopause. Hormonal replacement therapy has been found effective in treating menopausal women who became depressed.

There are sectors who believe that hormonal replacement therapy can be used to treat other complications arising from female menopause like diabetes, osteoporosis and heart ailments.

However, some women experiencing menopause do not go for hormone replacement therapy because of the possible side effects of the said treatment. There are those who believe that women taking hormonal replacement therapy have high risks of developing breast cancer. Hormonal replacement therapy has also been blamed for blood clot formations resulting to heart disease.

There are experts, including Dr. John Lee, who believe that hormone replacement therapy expose menopausal women to greater health risks than if they were not taking the therapy. The risk of getting cancer is one of the reasons why most women experiencing menopause opt for natural and alternative treatments for the many symptoms of menopause.

During menopause, the production of a woman's estrogen and progesterone levels become erratic. These hormones play important roles in maintaining the proper functioning of a woman's body like bone strengthening and blood cholesterol level maintenance.

During menopause, the production of these hormones decline and this causes bone problems and

## Hormone Replacement Therapy And Breast Cancer

other ailments. Hormone replacement therapy can bring back the proper levels of these hormones in women and can prevent the risk of getting various menopause–related diseases.

While estrogen replacement has been found effective as a treatment for many years, medical research has shown that it increase a woman's chances of getting breast and uterine cancer. This led the way to the addition of progestin to hormone treatments.

Women who eat the proper food and lead healthy lifestyles are the ones who are most probably able to experience menopause normally, even without hormone replacement therapy. For those who are thinking of availing of this therapy, it is important to talk this over with their doctors as the latter can give them the pros and cons of getting HRT.

The author is a regular contributor to the Hormone Info Center

where more hormone replacement information is freely available.



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