

Media Controversy on Hormone Replacement Therapy

For the past three decades, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) has brought relief to millions of women. However, over the past eighteen months or so there has been a great deal of concern in the popular press raised about the safety of hormone replacement therapy, to a point where the number of British women using HRT has dropped by 30%. In the United States the fall has been even steeper - HRT use is down by 50%. These figures are the result of two studies that apparently showed links between HRT and breast cancer, heart attacks and strokes. As recently as last week, another report was published which has caused even further confusion. This report suggested that hormone replacement therapy is not, in fact, linked with an increase in breast cancer or heart attacks and that, indeed, there may be fewer incidences of these illnesses. There is, therefore, a great deal of confusion, not only among the women themselves who might be considering HRT, but also within the health profession itself. It is, therefore, pertinent to make a few comments the recent research findings.

The Women's Health Initiative study published eighteen months is considered by some experts to have fundamental flaws for the following reasons:

The women in the study were too old. In real life, women on HRT usually begin taking it in their early 50s and their dose varies with age. In the WHI study, the average age of the participants was 63 and a quarter of the women were over the age of 70.

Each women was given a standard dose of HRT, whether she was aged 50 or 79, whether she had bone problems or depression, or simply flushes and sweats. Many women were also overweight or had high blood pressure, 8% of them had even had heart attacks before starting on the HRT.

Most women in this study did not have any menopausal symptoms. It would seem that the researchers specifically searched for women who were not suffering from hot flushes and similar symptoms - they suspected that anyone having trouble with the menopause would not want to volunteer for research, given that 50% of participants would be given a placebo in place of real medicine. Thus, women were being given treatment that they did not necessarily need.

It may not be surprising, therefore, that women did not experience any improvement in their well-being. There were no problems to resolve.

It is unfortunate that these findings from the studies were first announced at a press conference rather than being published in research journals to be debated first by scientists and other peers.

There was also a British study, called the Mirror Woman Study, which was published

some three to four months ago. In terms of its design, this was less robust than the American studies and many consider that it was full of errors and discrepancies. It was particularly notable that there was a large increase in breast cancer among in their first year of taking HRT. It would be somewhat surprising to blame HRT in this instance, since it takes several years before breast cancer is actually diagnosed. This implies that these women, who were found to have breast cancer must have had the breast cancer prior to commencing HRT.

Several years ago when there was the pill scare, many young women came off the pill and there were large numbers of unplanned and unwanted pregnancies and, therefore, large numbers of terminations of pregnancy with the attendant problems. Women coming off HRT will, of course, not suffer the problems of unwanted pregnancy, but many women now are suffering as a result of having come off HRT. Even if the results from the WHI and the Mirror Women's Study were true, the actual risks to an individual women are, in fact, small and the way they are portrayed in the media is very misleading.

In the Wimbledon Menopause Clinic we would aim to put these issues into perspective, while respecting that each women is allowed to make a choice. Whatever the facts or the myths, there will be women who will be very worried about conventional HRT. For that reason, we also offer alternatives to conventional HRT in the Menopause Clinic.