

## MENOPAUSE HORMONE THERAPY

### Introduction

You are starting hormone therapy for menopause. Please note the guidelines and instructions below. Almost all female hormone treatments include estrogen. This is the hormone that nearly disappears after menopause. Some patients can use estrogen alone, others have to use a second hormone as well.

### Patients who have their uterus (E+P)

If you have your uterus, you need 2 hormones because using estrogen alone can cause uterine cancer and the second hormone can prevent that. The second hormone might be natural progesterone or a synthetic progesterone derivative (called a progestin). With Duavee, the second hormone isn't a progestin, but it is also proven to protect against uterine cancer.

### Patients who do not have their uterus (E only)

Estrogen can be used by itself. Progesterone is normally taken to prevent uterine cancer, but when taken at bedtime, it can also be a sleep aid. If a woman has had a hysterectomy, progesterone has almost no role in menopause hormone therapy. There are differences of opinion, but this view is supported by menopause guidelines and specialists. If someone tells you that the most important hormone for menopausal women is progesterone, be careful. They are probably trying to sell you something and are providing incorrect information.

### Patients who use vaginal estrogen only

Vaginal estrogen is highly effective for treating vaginal dryness, painful sex, and some urinary problems such as urgency or frequent UTI. The dose of vaginal estrogen is very low. If you do not use other female hormones, progesterone is not needed, even if you have a uterus. Even patients with prior treatment for breast cancer can, in most cases, safely use vaginal estrogen.

### Progesterone skin cream

It is possible to buy progesterone skin cream without a prescription. The FDA allows this because bioidentical progesterone doesn't enter the bloodstream when applied to the skin. Some people who use this might feel better, which is fine, but topical progesterone skin cream does NOT prevent uterine cancer for a woman using estrogen hormone therapy. There are prescription hormone skin patches that contain estrogen and a progestin (not progesterone). These hormones can enter the bloodstream via the skin (see Combipatch or Climara Pro).

### Bio-identical hormone therapy (BHT)

This is mainly a marketing term. A bio-identical hormone means that the estrogen is estradiol (17-beta estradiol) and the progesterone is natural progesterone (not a progestin). Both of these are the same chemical as the active hormones in the body. Both are available in FDA approved forms and both can also be dispensed by compounding pharmacies. Despite being "popular," bio-identical hormones are still hormones, they require a prescription, and they are not safer than other hormones just because they are bio-identical.

## Starting Hormone Therapy

If you have a uterus, you need to use estrogen and a progestin or progesterone (E+P). If you have had a hysterectomy, you can use estrogen and do not need a progestin. Items 3-6 apply.

1. If you have irregular periods with some symptoms of menopause, maybe you are in perimenopause. Hormone therapy can still be used, but careful monitoring is necessary. Hormone therapy does not suppress natural ovarian hormone production, so your body continues to produce hormones. Your natural hormone levels can vary, and you are also using additional hormones, which might cause side effects such as irregular periods.
2. Bleeding or spotting is a common side effect when starting hormones. It is usually light, unpredictable, and normally resolves within the first 1-3 months. If bleeding is heavy, or if after a few months keeps happening, it should be evaluated.
3. Relief of severe hot flashes and night sweats might begin within 1-2 weeks. However, the full effects of being on hormones show up gradually. It can take 3-6 months to reach a steady state. This is why we advise staying on the hormones for at least 3-6 months before deciding to go off them or make changes.
4. Other hormone side effects can occur, and these vary from person to person. They are usually mild and disappear after a month or so. The side effects might be similar to PMS symptoms, but hopefully much milder given that hormone doses are low.
5. If you are new to hormone therapy, we usually schedule a follow-up 3 months after starting it. If you have major side effects or any concerns, you can call us, message us using the portal, or schedule a telehealth consult at any time.
6. Possible addition of Testosterone. This is another hormone used for some patients, mainly to help boost libido or sex drive. It is not FDA-approved for this use, but doctors can prescribe it. When done correctly, with proper doses, this hormone can be used safely and can really help. Other possible benefits include improved mood, energy, sleep and strength.

### TESTOSTERONE PELLETS WARNING

Some clinics offer to implant dissolvable hormone pellets under your skin. The risk is that your dose will be too high and will continue for months. There is no “off switch” for pellets. Once they have been placed, you have to wait until the hormones run out. There is a potential for severe and permanent harm from high and prolonged exposure to Testosterone. This includes possible permanent changes such as clitoral enlargement and pain, voice changes, permanent hair loss, facial hair growth, severe acne, all of which we have seen in patients who had Testosterone pellets inserted.

**Form of estrogen being prescribed**

\_\_\_ You are being prescribed estrogen orally (by mouth).

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\_\_\_ You are being prescribed estrogen using a skin patch.

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\_\_\_ You are being prescribed estrogen topical (skin) gel.

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\_\_\_ You are being prescribed vaginal estrogen.

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**Form of progesterone/progestin being prescribed**

\_\_\_ You are being prescribed pure progesterone orally. This can make people sleepy. Best to take it 2 hours before bedtime, it works more gradually than most sleep aids. Take it with some fatty-type food for best digestion and absorption, okay to take with dinner.

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\_\_\_ You are being prescribed a synthetic progestin orally. This can be taken at any time of day, with or without food. Try to take it the same time every day.

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**Combination Hormone Products**

Some hormone products combine the estrogen and progestin. There are combination hormone pills and combination skin patches. Below are combined hormone products.

\_\_\_ You are being prescribed Duavee (estrogen and a hormone blocker combined), one pill daily. This medication contains bazedoxifene (not a progestin) which protects the uterine lining.

\_\_\_ You are being prescribed an oral product that is a combination of estrogen and a progestin (or estrogen and progesterone).

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\_\_\_ You are being prescribed a skin patch that is a combination of estrogen and a progestin.

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