



MERCY MEDICAL GROUP

Estrogen or Hormone Replacement Therapy

DESCRIPTION

Estrogen replacement therapy (ERT) refers to taking regular doses of estrogen to replace natural estrogen that decreases with menopause. Menopause means having no menstrual periods for at least six months to one year. Menopause is part of a natural aging process and not a disease. For many women menopause is an easy transition; however, some women have a variety of symptoms that are related to lack of estrogen. If you are one of these women, you may benefit from some type of hormonal replacement.

Estrogen is one of the two major female hormones. The other is progesterone. For women who still have their uterus, progesterone is added to the estrogen to reduce the risk of cancer of the uterus. Treatment with both estrogen and progesterone is called hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or combination therapy. Estrogen and progesterone are available as tablets, creams, skin patches, vaginal suppositories and shots.

BENEFITS OF ERT OR HRT

Estrogen helps to relieve menopausal symptoms. ERT and HRT can reduce hot flashes, sweating, sleep disturbances and vaginal irritation. Estrogen is used for prevention and treatment of osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is a skeletal disorder that reduces the density of bone, thus making you prone to fractures. Bone loss begins around age 35 and accelerates rapidly at menopause. You are at greatest risk of the disorder if you are Caucasian, thin and fair skinned, if you smoke, or if your mother had osteoporosis. Calcium supplements can also help to cut down on bone loss.

Estrogen also helps to reduce the risk of heart disease. The risk of heart disease dramatically increases for a woman who has gone through menopause. If you have high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol or a family history of heart disease, estrogen therapy may reduce your risk for heart disease.

RISKS OF ERT AND HRT

The long-term effects of ERT and HRT are not yet fully known. Most studies have focused on the use of estrogen alone, and different studies have produced conflicting results. Therefore, it is important for you to talk with your health care provider about the potential advantages and risks of ERT or HRT.

Constant exposure of the lining of the uterus to estrogen without progesterone is associated with a higher risk of uterine cancer. To lower the risk, your physician may prescribe lower doses of estrogen combined with progesterone (HRT).

Studies are still being done to determine the risk of breast cancer with ERT and HRT. It is best to discuss this possible risk with your physician, especially if you have a family history of breast cancer.

SIDE EFFECTS OF ERT AND HRT

- Uterine bleeding and vaginal discharge
- Bloating, fluid retention and weight gain
- Breast tenderness and enlargement
- Nausea
- Headache
- Mood swings

- Gallstones.

SIDE EFFECTS OF HRT

Vaginal bleeding may occur with HRT. When you stop HRT, or during the days in the cycle when you are not taking hormones, you will usually have some bleeding. The bleeding typically lasts two or three days and is not usually accompanied by cramps or bloating. If your physician has prescribed a daily estrogen and progesterone regimen, without cycles, you will experience little or no bleeding.

PRECAUTIONS

If you have any of the following conditions or diseases, you should not take ERT or HRT:

- Unexplained vaginal bleeding
- Liver disease
- History of blood clots or strokes
- Endometrial or breast cancer

If you have any of the following diseases or conditions, you may want to avoid ERT or HRT:

- Uterine fibroids
- Endometriosis
- Fibrocystic breast disease
- Migraine headaches
- Gallbladder disease
- Family history of breast cancer
- Uncontrolled high blood pressure
- You smoke.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

If you are considering ERT or HRT:

- Have your doctor check your HDL and LDL cholesterol levels.
- Get a mammogram before you begin ERT or HRT to check for breast cancer
- Stop smoking.

If you are already taking ERT or HRT:

- Ask your doctor about any special precautions or side effects to consider
- If you are taking HRT, tell your doctor if bleeding occurs at any time other than the days when you do not take the hormones
- If you are taking ERT, and your uterus has not been removed be sure to have a yearly well-woman exam
- Have your cholesterol checked periodically
- Check your blood pressure regularly.

ALTERNATIVES TO ERT OR HRT

Although HRT is the most common therapy for menopause, there is another option. The main alternative is Evista® (raloxifene), a new drug that imitates some of the beneficial effects of estrogen, without the risks of breast or uterine cancer. Evista has similar beneficial effect on bone density as compared to ERT or HRT. Evista carries the same risk of blood clots as HRT for those patients who are at risk. Evista may actually produce hot flashes in some women.

NATURAL HORMONE SUPPLEMENTS

Natural hormones (phytoestrogens) are those chemicals that are derived from yam or soybean plants. Soy in particular contains plant-produced chemicals known as isoflavones that exert weak estrogen effect in the body. These isoflavones do not act exactly like the estrogens produced by the body or those used in HRT. Soy

products are known to cause stomach upset and gas. Natural hormone supplements are popular; however, few have proven sustained benefit for control of menopausal symptoms. Although some data are available for soy-based products, there are no convincing data regarding heart disease or osteoporosis.