

Keywords #1: hormone replacement therapy

Keywords #2: bioidentical hormone therapy

Problem: Hormone replacement therapy is an effective treatment for bothersome menopausal symptoms. However, research indicates that women taking conjugated equine estrogen and medroxyprogesterone acetate have increased health risks. Consequently, many women are switching to alternative therapies, such as bioidentical hormone therapy.

Solution: This article discusses the following:

1. How hormone replacement therapies have evolved
2. Which treatments are the safest

# Hormone Replacement Vs. Bioidentical Hormone Therapy

*Menopause is a normal life event. Yet, symptoms like night sweats, emotional changes and hot flashes make women feel anything but normal. Many women rush to their PCP, begging for relief. Symptoms of low estrogen are underestimated by those who have never experienced them. Approximately 75% of menopausal women report bothersome symptoms. Over 30% present with severe symptoms.*

*In the late 1900s, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) became a widely accepted solution. Women around the world exhaled a sigh of relief. However, is hormone replacement therapy a risk-free solution? Research indicates that specific estrogen and progesterone medications produce increased health risks. Consequently, many women are switching to alternative therapies, like bioidentical hormone replacement (BHT). Keep reading to learn more about the evolution of HRT and which ones are the safest.*

## Key Takeaways

- Most women will experience some level of menopausal symptoms, such as hot flashes, night sweats and mood changes. Women often turn to hormone replacement therapy for relief.
- After the release of the Women's Health Initiative results, an increasing number of women questioned HRT's safety. Estrogen and progesterone prescriptions decreased by 60%.
- Many women turn to bioidentical hormone therapy, assuming it is safer than traditional therapies.

- Not all bioidentical hormone therapies are FDA-approved. These compounds are riskier than conventional interventions.
- The NIH recommends transdermal estrogen combined with micronized progesterone. This HRT regimen maximizes results while reducing side effects.

## Hormone replacement therapy

Hormonal shifts during perimenopause and menopause cause **unwelcomed night sweats, hot flashes, emotional lability, poor concentration and sleep disturbances**. Women looking for relief from menopausal symptoms often rely on hormone replacement therapy. However, after the release of the Women's Health Initiative (WHI) results, the global perspective on HRT shifted.

### How it all began

*Feminine Forever* by Robert A. Wilson, M.D. was published in 1966 and quickly became a bestseller. Dr. Wilson claimed that "menopause is a hormone deficiency disease, curable and totally preventable, just take estrogen." Consequently, women rushed to their PCP, requesting HRT. **They hoped hormone therapy would eliminate symptoms and preserve their "femininity forever."**

In the 1970s, perspectives shifted. Research showed that estrogen supplements were associated with endometrial cancer. These findings quickly undermined HRT as an easy, risk-free solution for menopausal symptoms.

Reducing the estrogen and combining it with progesterone decreased endometrial cancer cases. In 1988, the Women's Health Initiative (WHI) evaluated the effects of HRT on three chronic conditions impacting postmenopausal women:

- Cardiovascular disease
- Cancer
- Osteoporosis

Could this combination therapy be the answer to preventing these chronic conditions in postmenopausal women?

### The shift in HRT

Results from the WHI hit the media and drastically impacted perspectives about HRT. The findings indicated that *conjugated equine estrogen and medroxyprogesterone acetate increased health risks*. The findings were surprising, showing an upsurge in the following:

- Breast cancer
- Cardiovascular disease
- Stroke

- Thromboembolic events

The trial was prematurely discontinued because the risks outweighed the benefits. Combination hormone replacement therapy reduced osteoporotic fractures, but cardiovascular and cancer conditions increased. Panic among HRT users ensued. A mass exodus away from hormone replacement therapy occurred. **Estrogen and progesterone (E+P) prescriptions decreased more than 60%. Women worldwide sought safer therapies.**

Though the study had clear research limitations, HRT's reputation was marred, and its safety questioned. Women wanted relief but were distrusting of all hormone replacement therapies. Consequently, women stopped taking their HRT medications and sought other non-conventional therapies. Many turned to non-FDA-approved bioidentical hormone therapy, assuming these interventions were safe.

## Bioidentical hormone therapy

Bioidentical hormone therapy (BHT) means different things to different people. It has no standardized definition. Some think about BHT in the following ways:

- Non-artificial or natural hormones
- Plant-derived hormones
- Chemically identical to human hormones
- Compounded hormone therapy

The Endocrine Society defines bioidentical hormones as "compounds that have exactly the same chemical and molecular structure as hormones produced in the human body." This broad definition has non-specific manufacturing and sourcing guidelines. It can include non-FDA-approved BHT and FDA-approved BHT. **The general public assumes BHT is natural and, therefore, safer than its synthetic counterparts.** Most people do not know that many FDA-approved HRTs also meet the qualifications for BHT.

Non-FDA-approved BHT has not been methodically tested for safety, effectiveness and purity. Consequently, it is riskier than traditional HRT.

## What is the optimal hormone replacement therapy?

Providers are left scratching their heads. If traditional HRT increases patients' risks, but many BHTs are not FDA-approved, what is the answer? According to the National Institute of Health (NIH), **transdermal estrogen combined with micronized progesterone is one of the best HRT regimens.** Unlike oral estrogen, the transdermal route is not associated with venous thromboembolism. Additionally, it is safe for women with a history of the following:

- Gallbladder disease
- Migraines

- Diabetes
- Obesity

Micronized progesterone is molecularly identical to progesterone produced by human ovaries. This hormone therapy boasts the following benefits:

- It provides relief from menopausal symptoms
- It produces fewer risks than traditional HRT
- It is the most bioidentical hormone replacement therapy currently prescribed
- This BHT comes from yams and is not associated with increased breast cancer.

## Demystifying women's health interventions

Hormone replacement therapy has been under scrutiny for decades. Fear of increased risks causes many women to pursue other options. Primary care providers are an essential resource for women considering hormone replacement therapy. PCPs must be aware of the risks and benefits associated with different HRTs. **With up-to-date information, clinicians demystify health interventions and help with treatment choices.**

Our staff delivers women's health services that maximize results while reducing risk factors. If you are looking for a partner in care, we are here for you. Click the "Refer" button to get started.

## Resources

"The dangers of compounded bioidentical hormone replacement therapy." NIH: National Library of Medicine, 2019, The dangers of compounded bioidentical hormone replacement therapy - PMC.

"Progesterone vs. synthetic progestins and the risk of breast cancer: a systematic review and meta-analysis." NIH: National Library of Medicine, 2016, Progesterone vs. synthetic progestins and the risk of breast cancer: a systematic review and meta-analysis - PMC.

"The Controversial History of Hormone Replacement Therapy." NIH: National Library of Medicine, 2019, The Controversial History of Hormone Replacement Therapy - PMC.

"Bioidentical Hormone Therapy." NIH: National Library of Medicine, 2011, Bioidentical Hormone Therapy - PMC.

