



HORMONE THERAPY

Bioidentical Hormones and Menopause: Separating Fact from Fiction

Many FDA-approved hormone therapies contain bioidenticals; special formulations are rarely necessary.



You've probably heard Oprah and Suzanne Somers touting the benefits of bioidentical hormone therapy, but you need to get past the hype and look at the facts.

"There are no data that support the claim that bioidentical hormones are safer or more effective. Estrogen is estrogen, whether it's in an FDA-approved product or in a hormone formulation from a compounding pharmacy," says Margaret Polaneczky, MD, associate professor of clinical obstetrics and gynecology at Weill Cornell Medical College. "The safest strategy is to take the lowest dose for the shortest time, and to use transdermal estrogen (delivered through patches applied to your skin) rather than oral forms, if possible."

"Bioidentical" defined

"Bioidentical hormones" are manufactured replicas of the same

Some FDA-approved hormone therapies, such as Climara and Vivelle, contain the same bioidentical form of estrogen as hormone formulations compounded at a pharmacy.

molecules your body uses. These molecules are all synthesized, usually from plants," explains Dr. Polaneczky. "Hormone products containing estrogen that are not bioidentical, such as Prempro, are made with mares' urine."

Many women believe that bioidentical hormones can be obtained only at a compounding pharmacy (a pharmacy that makes hormone formulations). "But bioidentical hormones also can be found in FDA-approved products such as Climara, Vivelle and Prometrium, to name a few," says Dr. Polaneczky. "You must be very, very careful if you are using a compounding pharmacy, since there's no monitoring of the quality of ingredients or the accuracy of the dosages," she adds. "If the amounts of hormones in

your compounded formula are too high, it can put you at higher risk of potential health problems."

Why the hype?

You don't have to look far to find out why bioidenticals are all the rage—it's the millions of dollars companies make on these products.

"There is a huge misperception among women concerning bioidentical hormones, but the women are not to blame; these products are purposely being marketed in a misleading fashion by those who are making money on these products. The FDA has been trying to step in, but the manufacturers are operating outside FDA guidelines and regulations," explains Dr. Polaneczky.

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Straight talk

Dr. Polaneczky says that she occasionally prescribes custom-made formulations for women who can't find the right regimen among the FDA-approved products, but this is the exception rather than the rule.

“Women like the idea of having personalized medicine, but your gynecologist can personalize hormones for you with the FDA-approved options that are available; for most women, there's no need for a compounded formula of hormones,” advises Dr. Polaneczky. 🌐

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

- Every woman who is considering hormone replacement therapy needs to be informed of the potential risks and make her decision based on her own risk factors, symptoms and concerns.
- Non-hormonal alternatives to handle your symptoms include serotonin selective reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and gabapentin (Neurontin) for hot flashes, low-dose vaginal estrogen for dryness, and over-the-counter remedies.