

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)

What is hormone replacement therapy (HRT)?

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is a treatment that some women choose to have around the time they go through **menopause** [MEN-uh-pawz] or have a **hysterectomy** [his-tuh-REK-tuh-mee]. Menopause is the natural time in a woman's life when her menstrual cycles (periods) change and eventually stop. A hysterectomy is a procedure to remove the uterus. HRT provides the hormones the body no longer produces during menopause or after a hysterectomy.



Why might I need HRT?

The changes in hormone levels that occur during menopause can cause some symptoms, including:

- Hot flashes
- Sleep problems
- Vaginal and urinary tract changes
- Pain during sexual intercourse
- Emotional changes, including depression or mood swings

There are also certain health risks associated with these hormonal changes, including:

- Decreased bone density
- Increased risk for bone fractures and osteoporosis
- Increased risk for heart disease

HRT can help with these symptoms and risks by replacing the hormones your body no longer produces.

What are the potential benefits of HRT?

HRT with estrogen (along with progesterone, if you still have a uterus) can relieve some of the symptoms of menopause. It is a common treatment for hot flashes and vaginal dryness. However, it may not be a safe option for every woman.

What are the possible risks and complications of HRT?

In most women, the greatest risks of HRT include a higher chance of having a stroke, heart attack, or breast cancer. HRT can also increase your risk of blood clots or **dementia** [di-MEN-shuh], which is a reduced ability to perform mental processes, including memory and reasoning. These risks are greatest if you are older than 60 or if you entered menopause more than 10 to 20 years ago.

Common side effects of HRT include:

- Nausea or bloating
- Weight gain
- Unexplained vaginal bleeding
- Mood swings
- Headaches
- Breast tenderness

Are there any alternatives to HRT?

There are several alternative ways to treat menopause symptoms. Some involve hormones and some do not.

General symptom relief

Options to manage menopause symptoms that do not require a hormonal medicine include:

- Wearing breathable clothing
- Drinking cold water
- Using fans
- Deep breathing
- Routine exercise
- Quitting smoking
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Using vaginal lubricants and moisturizers

Vitamins and supplements, including soy, black cohosh, and St. John's Wort, are often marketed as a potential treatment for menopause symptoms. Compounded hormone products called "bioidentical hormones" are also used by some women. However, evidence is lacking to support the use of these products.

Talk with your doctor to determine the best treatment option for you.

Hot flash relief

There are non-hormone medicines that can help with hot flashes. These include medicines that affect the level of the natural chemicals in your brain. These include:

- Venlafaxine (Effexor)
- Sertraline (Zoloft)
- Fluoxetine (Prozac)
- Paroxetine (Paxil, Brisdelle)
- Gabapentin (Neurontin)

Vaginal dryness and pain relief

To reduce vaginal dryness and pain with sexual intercourse, there are medicines that can help.

These include:

- Estrogen therapy in the form of a vaginal ring, vaginal tablet, or vaginal cream
- Ospemifene (Osphena)

What can I expect before starting HRT?

Your doctor will talk with you about factors like your age, other medical conditions you may have, and how long ago you entered menopause. Your doctor may also want to order tests to rule out other medical conditions. These factors will help you and your doctor make a decision about whether HRT is right for you. If you and your doctor decide that HRT is right for you, you will also discuss which form of the medicine is best. HRT is available in a variety of forms such as tablets, patches, and creams. Each woman's unique situation will help determine which form is best.

What can I expect after starting HRT?

If you begin HRT, you will follow up with your doctor at least once every year after you begin the medicine. You and your doctor will discuss how you are feeling and whether you should continue or stop the medicine.



Questions for my doctor

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