

Menopause – is HRT for you?

If so, which one?

Menopause is a natural part of the ageing process for women. It occurs as levels of the hormone oestrogen gradually decline until they reach a new lower level, at which they stabilise once again. The journey to menopause and the early stages post menopause can be challenging. Hormone replacement therapy may be part of the solution but what is it and what needs considering? Read on to learn more.



Why hormone replacement therapy?

Menopause is a natural part of the ageing process for women. It is deemed to have occurred once there has been 12 months without a menstrual cycle. Prior to that is a time called the perimenopause when changes to the menstrual cycle are often noticed alongside other symptoms which commonly include hot flushes, night sweats, anxiety, memory difficulties, joint pains, vaginal dryness, headaches, and fatigue.

These symptoms occur due to the complex workings of the neuro-endocrine system – it's a 'whole body' affair, not just the ovaries having reached 'retirement age'.

Many women struggle with balancing symptoms alongside work and / or family commitments. Without alleviation of symptoms approximately 10% of women in work leave paid employment which is an indicator of just how challenging this chapter of life can be for some women.

The symptoms occur due to dwindling hormone (oestrogen) levels and hormone replacement therapy (HRT) seeks to replace those levels.

HRT is medically prescribed and isn't suitable for everyone. Some women will prefer to use other ways to navigate through the menopause and not everyone has troublesome symptoms. For some women however, HRT can literally be a lifeline.

What is HRT?

Hormone replacement therapy replaces the oestrogen, which is predominantly produced by the ovaries, with some from the adrenal gland.

Oestrogen is an umbrella term for three types of oestrogen: oestradiol, oestrone and oestriol (the American version of these words drops the initial 'o'). Oestradiol is the main type of oestrogen produced between puberty and perimenopause.

HRT will always contain oestrogen. For women who still have a uterus (womb) taking progesterone alongside this is advised to protect the lining of the uterus and reduce the risk of endometrial cancer. If the uterus has been removed through surgery (hysterectomy) then an oestrogen only form of HRT is all that's needed.

These two components, oestrogen and progesterone are often provided separately. The progesterone element is usually in tablet form. The oestrogen element however is produced as tablets, patches, gel, or spray.

There are pros & cons for each, and GP's can help guide the choice.

Both the commonly prescribed progesterone and the gel, spray and patches forms of oestrogen are derived from yam plants and are body identical (the same shape) hormones.

Pros & cons of different types of HRT

The Oestrogen element of HRT has previously been associated with increased risk of blood clots. This is particularly associated with oestrogen in tablet form, so avoiding the tablet form is advised to reduce this risk.

Accessing the oestrogen via the skin avoids this issue as the oestrogen is absorbed directly into the blood stream. Women who have a history of migraine should also avoid tablet forms.

Gels, patches, and spray all deliver oestrogen via the skin. Lifestyle factors can help inform what will work best for you.

Patches can contain both the oestrogen and progesterone elements and just need replacing every few days, so they can be very convenient.

However, if you are a keen sports person or swimmer, it can make getting the patches to stick more challenging!

The gel and spray are applied daily to the skin and provide for convenience. All the skin applications enable the dose to be changed relatively easily if this is needed.

Ideally the dose of oestrogen used is the lowest possible to alleviate symptoms. It's a balance between avoiding the small increased risk of breast cancer (and blood clots if taking the tablet form) and accessing sufficient to alleviate the symptoms and gain the benefits from ongoing oestrogen levels.

Benefits include bone density preservation, reduced risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes and anxiety or depression.

Top tip: Oestrogen comes in many formats.

Vaginal oestrogen alleviates vaginal dryness and helps with genito-urinary health. It is a cream or pessary which is safe to use irrespective of medical history even with a history of breast cancer, and in advancing years.