

# HORMONE REPLACEMENT THERAPY (HRT) & STROKE

Feb 2007

## What is HRT?

As the name suggests HRT treatment replaces hormones that have become diminished or lost during the female menopause. Replacing the hormone oestrogen has been found to ease some of the symptoms of menopause.

## What are the symptoms of the menopause?

These include:

- Hot flushes
- Night sweats
- Mood changes e.g. anxiety, irritability, depression
- Changes to the vaginal and genital skin e.g. dryness

## How is HRT provided?

HRT can be provided in several different forms, and these also have several brand names depending on the drug company that produces it. The different methods all allow the hormone oestrogen to be absorbed into the bloodstream where it can be used by the body.

HRT can be provided in the form of:

- Pills
- Skin-patches
- Gel
- Nasal spray
- Implants which are put under the skin.

## What are the benefits of taking HRT?

The additional benefits of taking HRT are the protective effect against osteoporosis and bowel cancer. However, the protective effect is small. Studies have shown that if 1,000 healthy women who take HRT are compared to 1,000 healthy women who do not take HRT, in those who take HRT, over a 10 year period there will be about:

- 5 fewer women who develop a hip fracture. This is because you are less likely to develop osteoporosis, and therefore less likely to fracture a bone.
- 6 fewer women who develop cancer of the bowel. It is not clear how HRT reduces the risk of developing this cancer.

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## What are the risks of taking HRT?

Research has shown that if you take HRT, you have a small but increased risk of developing a serious illness such as:

- Stroke
- Heart disease
- A blood clot. This can cause a DVT (deep vein thrombosis) in the legs or PE (pulmonary embolism) in the lungs
- Breast cancer
- Ovarian and womb cancer
- Dementia.

## Should I take HRT after having a stroke?

Current research shows that if you have had a stroke you should **not** take HRT as it will slightly increase your risk of having another stroke or develop other health problems.

If you have been on HRT before having a stroke, your doctor will recommend that you stop taking it immediately, and will advise you against re-starting it in the future.

## What are the alternatives to taking HRT?

If you feel you need help to cope with your menopausal symptoms, you should discuss this with your GP. There are other measures that can help to ease the menopausal symptoms you are experiencing.

### For hot flushes and night sweats:

- Keep cool – have lukewarm baths or showers, wear cotton next to your skin, and sleep in a cool room.
- Cut back on hot drinks, alcohol and spicy foods.
- Take soya in your diet, in the form of tofu and soya milk.
- You can buy herbal supplements in health food shops, which help to reduce menopausal symptoms.
- Many women find Evening Primrose and Vitamin E relieve symptoms.
- Your GP can prescribe non-hormonal medications such as Venlafaxine or Clonidine.

**For vaginal dryness:**

- Use aqueous cream rather than soap for washing.
- Lubricants make sexual intercourse easier (e.g. KY Jelly or Replens).
- Your GP can prescribe oestrogen creams or pessaries.

**To prevent osteoporosis:**

- Increase the calcium in your diet by drinking a pint of skimmed or semi-skimmed milk a day, plus eating 60g (2oz) hard cheese such as Cheddar or Edam, or one pot of low-fat yoghurt (125g), or 60g of sardines.
- Take regular weight-bearing exercise.
- Your GP can prescribe additional calcium with vitamin D and other bone-restoring medication if you are at high risk of osteoporosis.

**What else can I do to help myself?****Look after your general health:**

- Stop smoking.
- Eat a healthy well-balanced diet with at least 5 servings of fruit and vegetables per day.
- Maintain your weight.
- Take regular exercise.
- Ensure you get enough sleep.
- Avoid stress where possible.

**Complementary therapies may also be helpful such as:**

- Aromatherapy
- Reflexology
- Homeopathy
- Acupuncture
- Yoga
- Massage
- Nutritional therapy
- Relaxation techniques
- Herbalism

## **Useful contacts**

### **The Menopause Amarant Trust**

80 Lambeth Road

London

SE1 7PW

Tel (Helpline): 01293 413000

Website: [www.amarantmenopaustrust.org.uk](http://www.amarantmenopaustrust.org.uk)

### **National Osteoporosis Society**

Camerton

Bath

BA2 0PJ

Tel: 0845 130 3076 (for general enquiries)

Fax: 01761 471104

Helpline: 0845 4500230 (for medical queries)

Email: [nurses@nos.org.uk](mailto:nurses@nos.org.uk)

Website: [www.nos.org.uk](http://www.nos.org.uk)

### **Chest, Heart and Stroke Scotland**

65 North Castle Street

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Website: [www.chss.org.uk](http://www.chss.org.uk)

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If you would like to speak to one of our nurses in confidence,  
please call the Chest, Heart and Stroke Scotland Advice Line

*Monday - Friday 9.30am - 12.30 and 1.30pm - 4.00pm*

**0845 077 6000**