

## What do women want to know about Hormone therapy- why do they seek alternatives?

Shelley Beer specialises in Chinese Medicine, and research into menopausal issues. She presented data to the World Menopause Congress in Sydney in 1996, about the alternative hormone therapy treatment seeking woman, and about Chinese medicine research into this stage of a woman's life.

"Many women seem aware of issues relating to the benefits and the side-effects of using HRT for menopausal symptoms. HRT is the most effective treatment available for hot flushes, but with it come the need for continued periods, and common side effects such as weight gain, headaches, bleeding irregularities and even PMS type symptoms. Women with family history risks & contra-indications for its use are counselled by their doctors, so they are usually well informed about these and associated issues.

The most vexing question that seems to bother women more than side effects and the like, is the controversy relating to HRT use and cancers- breast cancer & endometrial cancers.

Although these cancers appear to be related to long term use, it is these concerns that deter women from electing to use HRT even for short term use (such as symptoms at the time of the menopausal transition.) So, women seeking alternatives prompted the need to scientifically evaluate such therapies as Chinese Medicine for hot flushes. The results from this research are not complete, and still require more participants. Meanwhile, collecting data about women's concerns has become the focus of my work while the clinical phase of the trial continues to recruit.

As side effects, and contra- indications effect immediate use, and ongoing health & cancers are related to long-term use, let's examine the issues of HRT risks & benefits as an on-going basis. "

Breast cancer endometrial cancer, heart disease, osteoporosis? These are the choices postmenopausal women are offered. Why is healthy maturity not on that list?

If you age naturally the latest research argues that women will have a 50% greater chance of dying from heart disease, than a woman who uses Hormone replacement therapy (HRT). This line of thinking, goes on to argue that if you use HRT, the risk of dying from breast & /or endometrial cancer is very low, whereas the risk of dying from heart disease or stroke is very high. This is with women should choose to use the HRT drug for the rest of their life; because its benefits are not maintained unless use is ongoing.

Research shows that most women who use HRT long term are women who are seeking well being, and are using it for prevention of osteoporosis, and heart disease. The research that shows a 50 % reduction in heart disease only shows this effect in women who are unfit, and overweight. In women who are already fit, this reduction does not occur.

In this same research, the effect of exercise and diet against heart disease is not explored. So, women are being asked to accept research findings, based on data that does not mimic their circumstances.

Now, if you are a smoker, overweight, don't exercise, and have a family risk of osteoporosis or heart disease, then HRT is the drug therapy of choice.

So now the question becomes, what are the risks of HRT use? The short medical answer suggests that women have a far greater risk of dying of heart disease, than breast cancer.

A woman has a lifetime risk of one chance in fifteen, of developing breast cancer. Once a woman is over fifty, the chance of developing breast cancer increases to become one in ten. (10 %) The use of HRT increases this risk to one chance in four. (25%)

By contrast, once a woman reaches 50, her chance of developing heart disease is approximately one in two (46%), while 31 % of these women will actually die from this. The chance of developing a hip fracture is one in seven (15-16%), and dying from this, (1-3% ).

So ,although these diseases don't kill as many women who contract them, their morbidity (poor health) is probably just as important to consider.

So, the medical viewpoint prefers women to prevent heart disease and osteoporosis because they feel that women are at a greater risk of dying from these diseases. One paper I brought back from the World Menopausal Congress in Sydney recently argued that if 10000 women used Estrogen replacement therapy, 366 lives would be saved from reductions in hip fractures, heart disease & stroke, and only 66 lives would be lost due to breast and endometrial cancer. Why are these 66 lives not valued? What if you are one of those lives? This argument is economically driven. What costs less?

The final point to ponder- It seems that women more likely to die from heart disease "suddenly" around 75 years of age, whilst breast cancer deaths occur at a "slower' rate, and to "younger" women...?

My grandmother played golf until she was 82, and her heart kept going until she was 89. Her well being was not attributed to HRT, it was a zest for life., and an active one. Bowls & golf were featured activities in her life They are gentle, sustained outdoor activities that can keep joints mobile and the body subtly fit. Other fitness choices Women report are yoga, gardening and house work. Like the Chinese physician Sun Si Miao indicated way back before 1000 AD, a used [door hinge] does not become rusty and a running brook does not become stagnant. So, keep on using your bodies.

Let's put well-being back into the equation for decisions that evaluate risks & benefits of any therapy for the mature woman.

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