

2014

Bioidentical Hormones



Bioidentical Hormones for Menopause-related Vasomotor Symptoms

What are menopause-related vasomotor symptoms?

Menopause is defined as not menstruating (having your period) for over 1 year. Common effects of menopause are hot flashes and night sweats, also known as vasomotor symptoms (VMS). As you enter menopause, your levels of estrogen and progesterone hormones in your body naturally get lower. Lower hormone levels may be a cause of VMS.

Hot flashes may start about 2 years before the final menstrual period and decrease bit by bit over time. They can be mild to severe and can happen once in a while, or very often. Women who find the hot flashes hard to deal with may seek help.

What is used to treat vasomotor symptoms?

There are many treatments for VMS. Non-medication therapy involves:

- Exercise
- Stretching
- Breathing exercises
- Diet changes like eating less fatty foods and eating more fruits, vegetables and whole grains

Natural health products such as black cohosh, red clover, soy, and flaxseed are non-prescription products also used to treat VMS.

Prescription drugs for the treatment of VMS can include non-hormone medicines (for example, antidepressants) or hormone medicine. The goal of hormone medicine is to restore estrogen and progesterone levels in the woman's body.

What are bioidentical hormones?

Bioidentical hormones (BHs) are hormones that are made in a laboratory to be just like human hormones. Examples of BHs include:

- Estrone (E1)
- Estradiol (E2)
- Estriol (E3)
- Progesterone

BHs can be found in drug company products that are approved by Health Canada to be made, tested and sold in standardized dosage forms and strengths.

BHs can also be compounded (custom-made) by pharmacists. These custom-made products may be more likely to match the amount of hormones an individual woman needs to reduce VMS. As compounded products are created by hand in a pharmacy, the final product does not undergo the same testing as drug company products.

Why are women interested in using BHs?

A large study called the Women's Health Initiative (WHI) showed that using products with estrogens and progesterone that were not identical to human hormones had health risks, especially when used for a long time.

The WHI studied post-menopausal women who were taking this therapy for 5 years to find out the risks and benefits of using it. The study found benefits including less risk of fractures and some types of cancer. However, the study also found higher risk of heart disease, stroke, blood clots, and breast cancer. Because of these risks, alternative therapy for the treatment of VMS was sought. This led to an increased interest in BHs because they are identical to human hormones and therefore, are promoted as being safer and just as effective.

Are BHs effective for VMS?

Studies have been done to show that taking BHs reduces hot flashes. This evidence has come from studies that used products made by drug companies.

Compounded BH products may also work, but this had not been proven in large studies at the time this pamphlet was written.

Are BHs safe?

BHs, whether they are made by drug companies or compounded, have potential to cause health risks. To date there have not been any studies looking at the long-term safety of compounded BH products.

The bottom line

BHs are an option for treating VMS. They are available in products made by drug companies, and can be compounded in pharmacies. BHs in all forms, while likely effective for VMS, may have risks.

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Prepared by: College of Pharmacy, Dalhousie University
Designed by: Capital Health Library Services, Patient Education Team
Printed by: Dalhousie University Print Centre

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QV85-1526 Created May 2014

The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years.