



THE VOICE for Women & Families

Bio-Identical Hormone Treatment: Myth and Reality

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For millions of women across the country, *hormone therapy = confusion*. First, women were counseled that hormone therapy would keep them feeling young -- preventing heart disease, memory loss, and osteoporosis, and also treat symptoms of menopause such as hot flashes, night sweats, and vaginal dryness. Then came the news that hormone therapy can be hazardous. Then came dueling experts: some confidently tell us that hormones are not really dangerous, but others just as strongly say they do more harm than good. What's a woman to do?

What You Need to Know

New studies continue to make the news, but the basis for all the concern is a groundbreaking group of studies known as the Women's Health Initiative, which was paid for by the National Institutes of Health. This study showed that for most women, the risks of hormone therapy outweigh the benefits.

The studies found an increased likelihood of breast cancer, heart disease, stroke, and blood clots among women using hormones. There was no benefit for preventing memory loss. Other than reducing hot flashes and other typical symptoms of menopause, the only benefit was a small decrease in the risk of hip fractures and colon cancer.

Doctors had hoped that taking women off hormones would

immediately reduce those health risks. Unfortunately, they were wrong.

The latest research shows that the increased risk of breast cancer, for example, continues for at least three years after women stop taking hormones. Fortunately, the risk for heart disease and stroke decreased after a few years, but so did any benefits for preventing hip fractures and colon cancer. In addition, research suggests that even hot flashes may merely be delayed until the women stop taking their hormone pills.

All these studies were of hormone pills, and there is hope that hormone patches are safer. However, research is needed to find out if that is true.

What About 'Bio-Identicals'?

Because of concerns about the risks of traditional hormone therapy, "bio-identical" hormone therapy has suddenly become very popular. Some doctors claim that these drugs are effective at preventing and treating Alzheimer's, strokes, and cancer. Sound familiar? Once again, no studies support those claims.

"Bio-identical" hormone therapy uses drugs that contain hormones that are similar (although not necessarily identical) to the body's

National Research Center for Women & Families

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Protecting Families from Dangerous Toys and Other Products

Almost 500 different kinds of toys and products were recalled in 2007, and Congress has decided that the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) needs fixing. "It's about time," says Dr. Diana Zuckerman, president of the National Research Center for Women & Families. "It's obviously a problem when Barbie dolls and Thomas the Tank Engine toys are recalled because of lead -- but the problem goes much deeper than that."

In recent years, the CPSC staff has shrunk and CPSC officials have denied that they need more resources. Those denials, however, are contradicted by their own statistics: 28,000 people die and 33 million are injured every year by products under CPSC's jurisdiction. It wasn't until massive toy recalls were on every TV news program, however, that Congress decided that additional safeguards are a priority.

As this article goes to print, legislation has passed both houses of Congress, but there are differences between the two versions that need to be worked out. Both the House and Senate bills would significantly increase the CPSC's budget, include new powers for state attorneys general to better enforce CPSC regulations, and stipulate a major reduction in the lead content of children's toys and products.

The Senate bill, thanks to an amendment introduced by Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), protects children by banning the use of phthalates (a plasticizing chemical) in children's toys and products. Scientific research indicates that phthalates may increase the risks of genital abnormalities in boys. "This is a big victory for parents of small children," Sen. Feinstein said. "It will implement a nationwide ban on

toys and products that contain these dangerous chemicals. America's parents should be able to have ... peace of mind that the toys they buy for their children are safe." Dr. Zuckerman, who has spoken out for years on the dangers of phthalates, has urged Members of Congress to insist on the phthalates ban in the final version of the bill.



The Senate bill provides whistleblower protection to corporate and CPSC employees; the House bill does not provide this protection. The Senate bill also would create a new online product safety database to alert consumers more quickly to potentially dangerous products; the House bill would only require a study on the feasibility of a database.

"We're pushing hard for the stronger Senate language," said NRC's Government Relations Manager Paul Brown. "And since NRC has spoken out for years on the dangers of phthalates, we are especially urging Members of Congress to insist on the phthalates ban in the final version of the bill." A final bill is expected to be sent to the President for his signature before the August recess.

Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.), Rep. Bobby Rush (D-Ill.), and Rep. Joe Barton (R-Texas) shepherded the

bipartisan reform bill through the House. Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) and Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) and Sen. Mark Pryor (D-Ark.) steered the bipartisan bill through the Senate. Sen. Pryor says the goal is to "take this Consumer Product Safety Commission into the modern age and try to make sure that toys are safer and that all consumer products are safer."

The bill is expected to:

- **Increase funding** (considering all the work the CPSC is supposed to do, however, the expected increase of \$80 million is modest).
- **Raise the maximum civil fine** to at least \$10 million from the current \$1.8 million.
- **Increase criminal penalties** to five years in jail for those who knowingly and willingly violate product safety laws.
- **Reduce lead content** over the next few years to 100 parts per million (0.01% by weight). If the Senate prevails, phthalates will be banned.
- **Establish a public database** of unsafe products. Anyone can submit reports of injury, illness or death related to consumer products to the database. The public could quickly check on the safety of products.
- **Require safety testing** of children's products.
- **Set mandatory toy standards** to replace the current voluntary toy safety standards.
- **Improve labeling** by requiring manufacturers to label products with tracking information, which

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will be useful to consumers and retailers in the event of a recall.

- **Empower attorneys general** to enforce CPSC rules.
- **Protect whistleblowers** who are employees of manufacturers, retailers, importers or the government and who shed light on problems along the supply chain.
- **Make it unlawful for retailers to sell a recalled product.**

These are important improvements, but the bill could have been stronger. Congress did not fully restore the resources or authority that the CPSC had in the 1980s. For example, many experts believe that all-terrain vehicles are very unsafe, but the new bill includes weak, industry-sponsored language that does not adequately protect consumers. Moreover, although amusement park rides have not been regulated by the CPSC for more than 25 years, neither the House nor Senate restored that authority in the new law.

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natural hormones. Some people believe that because these drugs are more “natural” they are safer. The term “bio-identicals,” however, is not recognized by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and does not have a clear meaning. The bottom line: these drugs have not had to prove to the FDA that they are safe or effective because of a loophole in the FDA law.

No proof exists that these hormones are as safe or safer than current FDA-approved hormone therapy. Since they are very similar to the drugs already on the market, they likely will produce similar side-effects, including serious health problems.

What is the FDA Doing to Protect Women?

The FDA has warned pharmacies that sell “bio-identical” hormone therapy that it is illegal to make unsubstantiated and misleading statements.

The FDA also has made changes to the labeling requirements of regular hormone therapy. First, it required that hormone therapy labels include warnings about the increased risks for heart disease, heart attacks, strokes, and invasive breast cancer. Then it recommended that manufacturers of estrogen with progestin warn on their labels that these hormones not only fail to prevent mild memory loss but also can result in an increased risk of dementia in women over age 65.

Today, the official FDA recommendation is that hormone replacement therapy should be used at the lowest effective dose for the shortest time. In other words, women should not be taking hormones for more than a few years at the most.

When considering hormone therapy, remember that it is proven as an effective therapy only for the short-term treatment of moderate to severe hot flashes, night sweats, and vaginal dryness. Hormone therapy may delay but not prevent those menopausal symptoms, and it also delays but does not prevent osteoporosis. Compare that to the significant increased risks of breast cancer, stroke, and heart disease, and decide if that is enough benefit for you.

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Going Green at Work and Home

Everyone knows buildings can make you sick, but did you know that buildings can also be good for you?

“Greening” an office or home can make a positive change in people’s lives by improving the spaces and ways in which they live and work. Small changes in the design and products we use can contribute to the health of the planet and be good for your health as well.

For individuals, a green building can mean fewer headaches or asthma symptoms, more energy, and feeling better generally. For employers, healthier employees can translate to a happier workplace, increased productivity, and healthier bottom lines.

You might be surprised at what will make a difference:

1. Changing your lighting
2. More plants indoors as well as photos and other images of nature
3. Using fewer Volatile Organic Compounds (VOC’s), such as solvents in paints
4. Using energy-efficient design can increase productivity from 6-16%

What Can You Do to Make Your Office or Home Healthier?

Start with “green” furniture, good lighting and air quality, and energy efficient use of office equipment.

For many people, a computer is a big part of their day. Set computers to energy-saving settings and make sure to shut them down when you leave for the day. Simply putting the computer in “standby” settings will continue to waste energy and contribute to electromagnetic pollution in the air. By using a power strip with an on/off switch, the whole desktop setup can be turned

off at once. Printers, scanners, and other equipment that are used only occasionally can be unplugged until needed.

Although they may not realize it, many people get headaches from the fluorescent lighting in their office or computer monitor. Usually imperceptible flickering in fluorescent lighting (on your ceiling or on your computer screen) can trigger migraine headaches. Some mentally ill individuals find these flickers very disturbing. Fortunately, many newer computer screens and fluorescent lighting are designed to flicker so much faster that they don’t disturb anyone.

Lighting Matters

Natural light lifts spirits, makes spaces appear larger, reduces eye-strain, increases our productivity, and lessens electrical demand. Not only is natural daylight a free source of lighting, it also has been proven to improve worker productivity and satisfaction (as well as boost sales in retail settings).

You may have heard some controversy about whether to replace incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFL). CFL bulbs save a lot of energy and flicker quickly enough to not cause headaches, but they do contain small amounts of mercury, so if they break you need to be careful. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has published guidelines (<http://www.epa.gov/mercury/spills/index.htm>) on how to clean up if a CFL tube (“bulb”) breaks – for example, put it in two plastic bags before disposal. For bulbs that no longer work but are not broken, CFLs should be recycled properly because of the mercury.

Another way to save energy on

lighting is the use of LED desk lamps, which are especially energy-efficient.

Indoor Air Quality Matters

Did you know that indoor air is often more polluted than outdoor air? The average person spends 90% of his or her time indoors, and the EPA estimates that up to 50% of all illness is caused by indoor air pollution.

How does indoor air affect your body? Pollen, mold spores, bacteria, tobacco smoke, formaldehyde, methylene chloride, and ammonia are all examples of common indoor air pollutants. They can cause eye irritation, headaches, sinus problems, nausea, dizziness, breathing difficulties, fatigue, and cancer. Good ventilation and using paints, furniture, and carpeting that are low on VOC will keep employees healthier.

A good first step is proper ventilation, and the best way to do that is opening the windows when possible. Whether at home or work, open windows regularly and use green cleaning products to reduce chemical exposure. Using citrus and pine-based solvents can react with ozone to create formaldehyde, so even though they smell good, you might want to avoid them.

Indoor air pollution often comes from chemicals from things in your home or office: the polyurethane in mattresses, formaldehyde and organic chemicals (including dioxin or phthalates) in carpeting, and polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) and other compounds used in furniture, telephones, and other common products in homes and offices.

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Meet Board Member Dr. Nancy Hardt

When a physician goes to work in Congress, Congress benefits from that doctor's expertise and perspective. But how does it influence the doctor?

"My experience on Capitol Hill was transformative," says NRC's new board member, Dr. Nancy Hardt. "I go about everything a little bit differently. I am much more unselfish as a provider because my perspective is the greater good in health care. That means finding ways to provide the most cost-effective services that will give us the outcome we want – healthier adults and children."

Dr. Hardt went to work on Capitol Hill as a Robert Wood Johnson (RWJ) Health Policy Fellow in the fall of 2006. In early 2007, she went to work for Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.) and then for the Speaker of the House, Rep. Nancy Pelosi.

"I first learned about the National Research Center for Women & Families when we met in the Bingaman office to discuss their concerns about the Food and Drug Administration," Dr. Hardt explains. "I was impressed by their efforts, and continued to work with them when I switched to work in the Speaker's office."

"Many Congressional staffers care about health issues, but the RWJ fellows are more focused and more knowledgeable, and that is great for nonprofit advocates who have similar interests

and perspectives," adds NRC President Diana Zuckerman. "Having Dr. Hardt in such a key role in the House gave us hope for better FDA legislation."

When her fellowship year was over, Dr. Hardt returned to academia but wanted to continue policy work. Joining the NRC Board was part of her transformation after working on Capitol Hill.



Her work as a physician has also been transformed. A new position was created for her at the University of Florida College of Medicine: Senior Associate Dean for External Affairs. Although still a professor of pathology, immunology, and laboratory medicine and of obstetrics and gynecology, her role as Dean enables her to focus on new ways to improve the lives and health of people living in the east side

of town, an impoverished neighborhood.

Many of the people living in Gainesville are connected to the university; most have good access to medical care. But right next door is a community that is underserved and has all the symptoms of that: teen mothers, single-parent households, high infant mortality, and low-birth-weight babies. "We are creating a report card to identify what the needs are, and to find ways that the university and the community can collaborate to meet those needs," Dr. Hardt explains.

"We have students and faculty with expertise in education, psychology, social work -- every imaginable health specialty and discipline. My ideal would be to create a model that could be replicated in any university town. We will include students, medical residents, faculty -- everybody. Students could help with health education and disease prevention through service learning, which is an ideal adult learning environment. At the medical school, for example, students can get course credit for up to 80 hours of community service. With 400 to 500 students per year -- think of what we could accomplish with all those hours of smart, energetic, creative young people. Our goal is to figure out how to mobilize those student and faculty resources to benefit the university and the community."

Leaving a Legacy

If we can't live forever, at least we can help keep our legacies alive, as well as the legacies of those most important to us. Creating an internship is a wonderful way to honor a family member or friend, or to create your own legacy. Internships provide training that can result in a lifetime of good works and they help NRC for Women & Families make a difference in the lives of adults and children every day. You can donate to legacy internships or establish a new internship or fellowship through a donation of cash or stock, a distribution from a retirement plan or life insurance policy, or a will.

For more information, call Dr. Diana Zuckerman at (202) 223-4000 or e-mail her at info@center4research.org

How Clean Is Your Drinking Water?

Since bottled water contributes to global warming, tap water has again become the “cool” choice. Whether or not we use filters to remove metals and chlorine, most of us trust the safety of our water.

Maybe we shouldn't. The latest research shows that the water used by more than 41 million Americans is filled with traces of powerful medications. There is evidence that even more water is contaminated by other chemicals that could be harmful.

Many of the cities investigated, including Washington, D.C., had traces of antibiotics, anti-epileptic medication, synthetic hormones, heart medication, and other pharmaceuticals in their water. Although the amounts were small, the bottom line is that nobody knows if using that water – for drinking, cooking, showering -- could harm our health.

“83 different pesticides and fertilizer chemicals were found in the treated tap water of 42 states, as well as 166 industrial chemicals from factories and consumer products.”

Unfortunately, there are other things in our water that also don't belong there. Two chemicals commonly used in plastics, bisphenol A (BPA) and phthalates, have been linked to reproductive health problems because they mimic hormones. Eighty percent of 139 streams tested nationwide were contaminated with these synthetic chemicals and others like them. An investigation in San Francisco found that 18 of 19 wastewater sites were contaminated as well. The Environmental Working Group reports that 83 different pesticides and fertilizer chemicals were found in the treated tap water of 42 states, as well as 166 industrial chemicals from factories and consumer products.

There aren't good alternatives. Many bottled water companies just repackage tap water. Home filtration systems lack the technology necessary to remove these drugs and chemicals.

Even water treatment plants lack the equipment to remove such small traces of drugs and chemicals. Without federal requirements or regulations, there is no

“Be careful about how you dispose of medications, whether prescription or over the counter.”

pressure for companies to make a filtration system that can remove those potentially dangerous substances.

Where Does it Come From?

After you take medication, all of the byproducts of what you used, and the parts of the drug you didn't, are flushed out of your system in urine, which goes into the water supply to be purified. When people dispose of medications improperly by flushing them down the drain or the toilet, these also go right into the water supply. Since treatment

plants lack the technology to remove the drug traces, they simply stay in the water – which you then use in your sink or tub.

Chemicals such as phthalates and BPA get into the water when companies making plastics get rid of their industrial waste. These chemicals are also present in everyday cosmetics and plastic containers, so they can get into the environment when we dispose of them. Phthalates and BPA can be found in nail polish, toys, cell phones, paints, and food wrappings. These chemicals can get into our bodies through normal use, and through the water we drink and cook with because water treatment plants cannot filter them out.

There are researchers who believe that these chemicals are at such low concentrations that they do not pose a threat to humans. The truth is that no one has

done the research needed to prove that. Research is already starting to show environmental effects of contaminants in the water. For instance, in 2003

researchers discovered that male small-mouthed bass in the Potomac River were developing intersex characteristics – such as making eggs. In 2006 and again in 2008, more bass were found to have these characteristics in other states. Although fish are especially vulnerable because they live in the water and are much smaller than humans, effects of these environmental pollutants could eventually show up in people.

What Can You Do?

Be careful about how you dispose of medications, whether prescription or over the counter. Many communities have specific disposal sites for things such as drugs and batteries that should not go into the normal trash or water supply. NRC for Women & Families is working with Congress to ban BPA and phthalates in certain products, such as baby bottles and children's toys. The best way to protect our water supply and to keep it clean is to control what we put into it in the first place.

Individuals can help, but we also need policy changes. The Environmental Protection Agency should set a standard for safe levels of pharmaceuticals and chemicals in the water, and require water treatment plants to abide by it.

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Newer buildings often have good self-contained ventilation systems that are more energy efficient, so even though you may not be able to open the windows, if the air filters are high quality and changed regularly, you should feel fine.

Plants Matter

Research shows that contact with nature enhances healing in measurable ways. In a landmark study published more than 20 years ago, Roger Ulrich, Ph.D., a professor of architecture, found that patients recovered from gallbladder surgery more quickly and required less pain medication if they had a view of trees outside their windows than if they looked out on a brick wall. This is a win-win situation: it is good for the patients and saves money for medical care.

It seems that your grandmother was right: it is good to get fresh air to help you recover from illness. Going outside can make a difference, and so can a view of nature through your window, plants inside your room, and even decorating your room with artwork depicting the out-of-doors.

What Else Can I Do at Home?

You may know that new carpets can cause headaches, but did you also know that cleaning your existing carpets can release harmful chemicals from the glue used to attach the carpet to its backing? These chemicals include such known carcinogens as formaldehyde, toluene, benzene, xylene and styrene. These chemicals may also cause headaches, runny eyes, and runny noses for months or years. Many carpet cleaners contain toxic ingredients, some of which are not listed on labels because they are considered "trade secrets." The carpet

cleaners and spot removers that are particularly dangerous contain chemical solvents.

How Can I Clean My Carpets?

Try not to use carpet shampoos that leave a sticky residue on carpet fibers. The residue is usually hard to see or feel, but you may be able to smell it. Not only does the residue attract and latch onto dirt, but children, who crawl and play on carpets, can inhale these residues. They also can get them on their hands, which often go into their mouths.

All family members should stay out of the house for at least four hours after carpets are cleaned.

Before buying or using a carpet cleaning product, read the label to find out if it contains any of the toxic ingredients on the National Institutes of Health Household Products Database.

How Can I Paint 'Green'?

Have you ever noticed that paint fumes can make you feel woozy as well as give you headaches? That's because many paints contain chemicals that emit noxious gases. This can continue after the paint dries.

To avoid that health hazard, choose paints that don't have harsh ingredients such as benzene and formaldehyde. Either can trigger asthma and allergies. If the can of paint has an EPA, OSHA or DOT seal on the label, it contains hazardous chemicals that have to be monitored by the government. Be sure to ventilate the room when you are painting. Don't forget to dispose of those extra cans of paint responsibly; a gallon of conventional paint that is thrown away can seep into the earth and pollute 250,000 gallons of drinking water.

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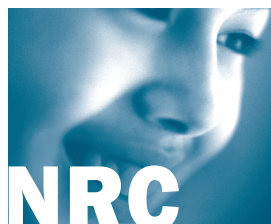
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