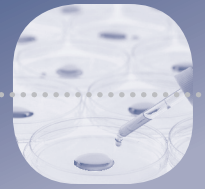


# Understanding transdermal estrogen therapy and micronized progesterone



As you approach menopause, your ovaries stop producing estrogen and progesterone hormones, causing many changes for your body — the symptoms of menopause can have a serious impact on a woman's quality of life. Hormone therapy works by replacing a portion of these hormones. Some women (such as those who have had a hysterectomy) may only need to take estrogen therapy, while others who still have their uterus will benefit from taking progesterone as well, since this protects against endometrial cancer.



Hormone therapy (also known as HT) is proven to be a safe and effective method of managing moderate to severe menopausal symptoms. Hot flashes or night sweats affect 60 to 80 per cent of women entering menopause, and research shows that hormone therapy is the most effective treatment for managing these symptoms.



Hormone therapy can reduce the frequency of hot flashes by up to 75 per cent, and can also lessen their severity. It is also effective in decreasing vaginal atrophy, joint pains and aches, and risks of osteoporosis-related fractures and colorectal cancer. As well, HT can help prevent mood swings, a common menopausal symptom.

## Transdermal estrogen therapy

One method of using estrogen is *transdermally*: the estrogen is bioidentical, meaning it is chemically identical to what your body produces, and is absorbed through your skin from a gel or patch. Transdermal therapies offer several benefits because of how the estrogen is processed by your body. Orally administered estrogen must first pass through your digestive tract and liver before entering the bloodstream; the advantage of transdermal estrogen is that it can enter your bloodstream directly.

- **Risk of blood clots**

Although this risk is very small, oral estrogen therapy may slightly increase a woman's risk of a blood clot (also called venous thromboembolism or VTE). However, there appears to be no increased risk of a blood clots for women who take estrogen transdermally. This option is particularly good for a woman with an underlying condition that puts her at higher risk for blood clots.

- **Risk of stroke**

Some studies have shown that oral estrogen therapy may slightly increase a woman's risk of stroke, particularly with higher doses. There appears to be no increased risk of stroke associated with transdermal estrogen therapy.

- **Release of medication**

Transdermal estrogen allows for a steadier release of medication than is offered by oral estrogen therapy. This helps to avoid mood swings and migraine headaches. Transdermal therapy can also be beneficial for women who have trouble taking oral tablets because of stomach upsets or have trouble taking a daily pill.

## Micronized progesterone

Progesterone is a hormone that is naturally produced by women; progestins are synthetic progesterones that have the same effect in your body as progesterone, although they are metabolized in a different way. Oral micronized progesterone is bioidentical, meaning it is chemically identical to the progesterone produced by your body. For women who are taking estrogen therapy and have a uterus, progesterone therapy is usually recommended to moderate the effects of estrogen on the lining of the uterus. Oral micronized progesterone has several benefits.

- **Sleep and water retention**

When micronized progesterone is metabolized, the by-products may help with sleep and fluid retention. However, there is a small possibility that micronized progesterone could cause increased nausea and dizziness.

- **Risk of breast cancer**

Estrogen therapy alone does not appear to increase a woman's risk of breast cancer when used for less than five years. However, estrogen therapy with progestin has been associated with an increased risk within three to five years of starting therapy. Estrogen in combination with micronized progesterone is *not* associated with a similar increased risk of breast cancer.

- **Vascular benefits**

Estrogen therapy is known to have beneficial effects on a woman's vascular system, in terms of blood levels of some hormones. These benefits can be negated by some types of progestin; however, micronized progesterone does not counteract the positive vascular effects of estrogen.

- **More regular bleeding patterns**

Micronized progesterone is associated with a lower incidence of bleeding, in terms of the proportion of cycles with bleeding, as well as the proportion of women who experience irregular bleeding.

## How estrogen affects your body

**Brain**

Helps maintain body temperature

**Bones**

Helps to preserve bone density

**Heart and liver**

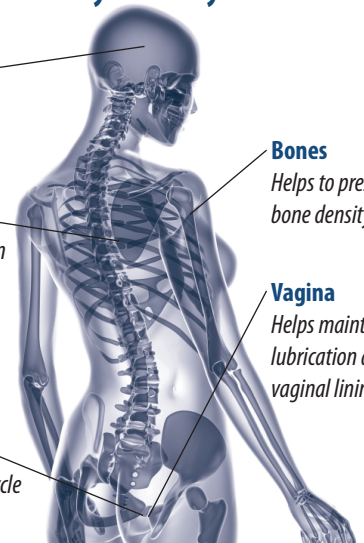
Regulates production of cholesterol and decreases plaque in coronary arteries

**Vagina**

Helps maintain lubrication and thick vaginal lining

**Ovaries**

Stimulates the start of menstrual cycle



# Understanding the menopause transition

Menopause is a natural transition in a woman's life — as her ovaries stop working and producing hormones, she is no longer able to naturally conceive and her menstrual cycle stops. The time leading up to menopause is called *perimenopause*, and this can last from five to eight years. During this time, the ovaries produce less estrogen, causing changes in a woman's body.

Every woman experiences the symptoms of menopause differently — but one piece of advice applies to everyone: menopause is the ideal time to look at nutrition, exercise and lifestyle choices. You can take steps in your daily life to manage the symptoms of menopause. If lifestyle changes aren't enough, there are a variety of other treatment options to consider, and a visit with a health-care professional will help you explore those options.

## What are the symptoms?

Most women experience the physical and emotional changes of perimenopause in their mid-40s or early 50s, though symptoms can occur earlier or later. The most common symptom women experience early is irregular bleeding. However, a clear sign menopause is approaching is when a woman experiences hot flashes: feelings of intense heat in the head and upper body. Other symptoms can include the following:

- Night sweats, racing heartbeat
- Sleep disturbances, insomnia, fatigue
- Vaginal dryness, discharge or bleeding
- Decreased sex drive
- Anxiety attacks, depression, memory loss, difficulty concentrating, mood changes
- Dizziness, nausea
- Loss of bladder control, reoccurring urinary infections



## How can menopause be treated?

**Making healthy lifestyle choices** may ease the severity of the menopause transition. Following Canada's Food Guide, making time for regular exercise, finding new ways to manage stress and maintaining your weight are all ways to help you feel better during menopause. Experts agree that the menopause transition is an excellent time to refocus on your health and wellness — and that includes cutting back on caffeine and alcohol, and quitting smoking.

**Hormone therapy (HT)** may be prescribed to help manage moderate to severe menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes. Hormone therapy works by adding back some of the missing estrogen hormone, and can be taken in many different forms. This treatment can be taken orally (pills) or transdermally (gels or patches). Women who are experiencing primarily vaginal symptoms of menopause can take estrogen therapy vaginally (tablets, creams or rings). Together, a woman and her health-care professional will be able to identify the right option for her symptoms, medical history and lifestyle.

**Non-hormone-based prescription medications** are also available to help with moderate to severe hot flashes, when hormone therapy is not an option for you.

**Complementary and alternative therapies** have not been through the same kind of testing process and government-regulated approvals process as prescription medicines, so long-term safety data on many of these is not yet available. Before using any alternative or complementary therapy, it's a good idea to consult your health-care professional.

This includes herbal remedies as well as 'bioidentical hormone therapy' — a term that is commonly used to refer to custom-mixed recipes that are not regulated or approved by regulatory authorities, and thus there is no scientific evidence of the effect they may have on the body. Before using this kind of compounded cream, talk to a health-care professional.

## Is hormone therapy safe?

Hormone therapy is a safe and effective option for many women who are suffering from troubling menopausal symptoms. Research shows that no other treatment option is as effective as HT for relieving hot flashes. As well, it is highly effective in preventing bone loss and osteoporotic fractures and relieving joint pain, and can also relieve vaginal dryness and other urogenital symptoms.

## Where can I go for more information on menopause?

### **Menopauseandu.ca**

This public education website, developed by the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, has evidence-based, credible information on menopause and its symptoms and treatment options. You'll find answers to your questions here.

