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Bio-identical Hormone Replacement Therapy: Fact and Fiction

Part 1: Definitions and Distinctions – Not all hormones are created equal.

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The conflicting information in the media today regarding the effects of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) leave many women confused and afraid. Our clients come to us with concerns about the safety and efficacy of their prescriptions. We understand that it is difficult to find good quality information. Over the next few months we will offer a series of articles where we hope to dispel the myths surrounding hormone replacement, clarify what the research tells us about using hormones therapeutically, and enable our readers to make informed decisions about whether HRT is right for them. This month we will begin by differentiating between two main categories of hormones: bio-identical and “mismatched” hormones.

Media reports rarely distinguish between different types of hormones, yet there are many to choose from on the market. While one could categorize hormones based on their source of origin (i.e. plant based, synthetic, or animal derived), we consider the most important distinction to be the molecular structure of the hormone. Bio-identical hormones are structurally identical to the hormones our body manufactures. Hormones with structural variations (such as conjugated equine estrogens or medroxyprogesterone) will have hormonal effects in humans, but their systemic action is not exactly the same as our own hormones. We call these “mismatched” hormones because they are not structurally identical to human hormones.

The majority of HRT research has looked exclusively at mismatched hormones for two main reasons. Firstly, mismatched hormones were the first to be used therapeutically and thus have been around longer. Secondly, pharmaceutical companies are unable to patent bio-identical hormones and therefore will not profit from research promoting their benefits. The research that is available, however, suggests that bio-identical and mismatched hormones produce very different therapeutic results. Studies indicate that bio-identical hormones offer stronger benefits with fewer side effects than mismatched hormones.

The recent splurge of negative press regarding HRT was based on clinical trials using mismatched hormones. The data supported that mismatched hormones can increase the risk of breast cancer and heart disease. The media, however, failed to recognize that the effects of bio-identical hormones were not part of this research. As a result, many women who would benefit from HRT have abandoned or refused treatment, unaware that other options exist.

To learn more about bio-identical hormone replacement therapy, please contact us for an information packet. *Look for Part 2 in the next issue: What are the benefits of HRT?*