

HRT and breast cancer

The risk of breast cancer is many women's main concern when they're considering taking HRT. This is mainly due to a 2002 study by the Women's Health Initiative that claimed HRT was associated with an increased risk of breast cancer and cardiovascular disease. Fortunately this study has since been re-examined, and new research shows that, for most women under 60, the benefits of HRT outweigh the risks. It's also important to remember that the type of HRT used in this study is not usually prescribed today.

What is the risk of breast cancer when taking HRT?

Every woman in the UK has a 1 in 7 chance of developing breast cancer, whether they take HRT or not. There are several factors that increase your risk, including getting older, being overweight, drinking alcohol, smoking, not exercising regularly, and having family members who had breast cancer at a young age.

Until you reach the age of 51, you might be surprised to discover that you have absolutely no increased risk of getting breast cancer when you take HRT. This is because you are simply replacing the hormones that your body would have been producing until the average age of menopause.

There is no good evidence that taking any type of HRT at any age significantly increases the risk of developing breast cancer. Studies have also shown that women taking HRT actually have a lower risk of dying from breast cancer as well as a lower risk of developing diseases such as heart disease, osteoporosis, diabetes and dementia.

Combined HRT

HRT containing micronised progesterone (the body's natural progesterone that is called Utrogestan in the UK) is not associated with an increased risk of breast cancer. Any increased risk of breast cancer appears to be associated with older types of HRT containing synthetic progestogens. Even with these types of HRT the risk is very low.

The risk of developing breast cancer is actually higher in women who drink moderate amounts of alcohol, who are overweight or women who do little exercise as these lifestyle measures are actually all risk factors for developing breast cancer.

Oestrogen-only HRT

If you've had a hysterectomy you won't usually take progesterone, and can take oestrogen-only HRT. Studies have shown that if you take this type of HRT you don't have any increased risk of breast cancer, and may even have a lower risk than women not taking HRT.

Understanding your risk

Each woman's risk of breast cancer is different, and is linked to a range of different factors including age, genetics and lifestyle. If you have a family history of breast cancer, or have had breast cancer yourself, you may still be able to take some types of HRT. It's best to discuss your options with your GP, or a menopause specialist, so that you can weigh up your individual benefits and risks.