

Types of Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) is not a “one size fits all” treatments – the type and dosage given will vary according to your needs. There are many different combinations available, which can be taken in various ways – oral tablets, skin patches (like plasters), gels or sprays. The optimal type of HRT is body identical HRT – the hormones are the same as the hormones you naturally produce in your body.

There are so many different types of HRT available. This means that the dose and type of HRT can be altered to suit your individual health – needs and risk factors for other conditions, for example if you have had a clot in the past or have high blood pressure. Many women want to take ‘natural’ products for their menopause, but how do you define ‘natural’? There are many medicines available that derive from plants, so therefore they are ‘natural’, but these are often unsafe and have been shown to be harmful to your bodies. For example, although black cohosh has been shown to have some benefit in the treatment of hot flushes, some types of black cohosh have been shown to be associated with liver toxicity.

Oestrogen

Levels of oestrogen in your body reduce during the perimenopause and menopause and once you have gone through the menopause, your levels of oestrogen will remain low forever, if you do not take HRT.

The optimal oestrogen in HRT is a type of oestrogen called ‘17 beta oestradiol’. This is a body identical estrogen and has the same molecular structure as the estrogen which decreases in your body during the menopause. It is safer to have the oestrogen as a patch, gel or spray – as this is absorbed directly through your skin and has less side effects and risks. These types of oestrogen can be safely given to women with migraines and those with a higher risk of clot, as there is no increased risk of clot using these types of oestrogen. It is also natural because it is derived from a plant – chemical that is extracted

from yam plants. Some types of older HRT contain a mixture of different types of oestrogens and are made from pregnant mares’ urine. This type of HRT could be described as ‘natural’, but it is not body identical as it contains many types of oestrogens that you do not need in your body. This type of HRT is rarely prescribed by doctors these days.

Progesterone treatments

There are many different types of progestogens (synthetic progesterone) available for women. If you still have a womb (uterus), it is important that a progestogen is prescribed alongside the oestrogen for your HRT. When you take oestrogen, the lining of your womb can build up, which can increase your risk of cancer. However, taking progestogen or progesterone prevents this build-up, which means there is no increased risk of cancer when you take HRT.

The optimal type of progestogen is called ‘micronised’ progesterone (Utrogestan in the UK). This is a “body identical” progesterone as it has the same molecular structure as the progesterone in your body. This means it is usually associated with fewer side effects than other types of progestogens.

Side effects of progestogens can include bloating, spots and mood swings. Micronised progesterone is also made from the yam plant. The additional advantage of micronised progesterone is there is no increased risk of breast cancer for the first five years of taking it. After this time, the risks of breast cancer are very low and are lower than the risk for a woman taking the older types of progestogen.

Testosterone

The other hormone that many women find beneficial to replace is testosterone which is actually produced by your ovaries in greater quantities than oestrogen, before the menopause. Testosterone can improve mood, energy, stamina, motivation and also libido. It is usually given as a gel or cream and this is also body identical.

So in summary, the safest types of HRT are the oestrogen applied through the skin as a patch, gel or spray with body identical micronised progesterone. Many women also benefit from testosterone.

Working out the right dose and type of HRT necessitates a very individualised approach. Women often find that it is only when they are given the right balance of hormones for them, that their symptoms really start to improve. It is useful to remember that as well as improving symptoms, HRT lowers your future risk of developing diseases such as osteoporosis, heart disease, type II diabetes and dementia.

When you start taking HRT, you should notice that your symptoms begin to improve within one to three months. If you don't start to feel better after three months, or your symptoms return, this is usually a sign that you need to adjust your dosage, or even try a different type of HRT.