

*In the past hormone therapy was one size fits all. There were a small number of pills and limited doses available. Now women have multiple options from which they and their healthcare providers can choose. The dosing options are more varied as well. This allows for much better tailoring to meet a woman's individual needs. In our current article, Dr. Sueny Seeney, describes the newer choices.*

— Beverly Vaughn, MD  
“Menopause & You” Medical Coordinator



**Sueny Seeney, MD**  
Riddle Hospital  
Obstetrician/Gynecologist

Hormone therapy, commonly known as HT, is a treatment used to provide the estrogen and progestin that the body is producing in much lower quantities because of menopause, premature ovarian failure, or surgical removal of the ovaries.

In appropriate patients, HT can be the best treatment for many common menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes, night sweats, and vaginal dryness. It is also FDA approved for the treatment of osteoporosis. But, it also has risks.

HT is normally prescribed at the lowest possible dose needed to control the symptoms. Therefore it may take awhile to establish the best possible dose for each individual. Talking to a healthcare provider about all options can help determine how/if HT should be prescribed.

## Types of HT

HT comes in a variety of forms:

### The Pill

Most women begin with pill form because it's easy to take, easy to stop, easy to adjust the dose, and discreet. Reasons for choosing or changing to an alternative include side effects such as nausea, interference with other medications,

unsatisfactory control of symptoms, and remembering to take it every day.

There are many different HT pills available. Some contain just estrogen or progestin/progesterone and others contain a combination. These typically contain higher doses of hormones than patches because the pill has to be broken down by the stomach and liver before being delivered into the bloodstream.

### The Patch

HT skin patches are worn on any location below the waist. Skin patches allow a gradual absorption of hormones through the skin. Since they don't have to travel through the stomach and liver first, the dose is lower than the dose in pills which may result in fewer side effects.

Although the patch is easy to stop and typically has fewer side effects than the pill, it may be visible, cause skin irritation, or fall off. Women also need to remember to change it once or twice a week.

### Implants

Implants containing estrogen, typically in pellet form, are surgically inserted under the skin where the hormones are broken down and delivered into the body at variable rates. This involves a minor surgical procedure done in a physician's office with the use of a local anesthetic approximately once every six months.

Implants are long-lasting and eliminate the need for patient compliance with dosing schedules. They are also useful for women who have trouble absorbing hormones in other forms. However, implants are not easy to remove if the woman chooses to stop or to alter the dosage. Progestin or progesterone tablets will also be needed. Effectiveness may be lessened with continuous use.

### Gels and Sprays

These work the same way as patches by delivering hormones through the skin. Although gels are

This is intended as an information resource providing guidelines for women. As always, check with your own healthcare practitioner with your specific concerns and questions.

easy to stop, they can be messy and the correct amount needs to be applied each time. Gels are not commonly prescribed for women who have experienced premature menopause.

#### *Creams and Tablets*

Creams use a plastic applicator, a bit like a syringe, to deliver a measured dose of estrogen cream into the vagina to relieve dryness, itchiness, and bladder dysfunction. There is a vaginal tablet that can also be used. Neither, however, protect against osteoporosis nor do they help alleviate hot flashes and night sweats.

For vaginal symptoms only and for those concerned about taking estrogen, these local methods are generally worth trying. However, if symptoms are more general, a form of treatment which circulates throughout the whole body may be indicated.

#### *Vaginal Ring*

Femring®, a vaginal ring, can be inserted by a healthcare provider or the individual into the vagina and worn for three months at a time. This provides both relief of hot flashes and vaginal symptoms. There is another ring, known as Estring® which is placed in a similar manner. The vaginal ring delivers a very low dose of estrogen each month with very little absorption in the rest of the body. This is useful where the main postmenopausal complaints are related to thinning of the vaginal walls, vaginal dryness, and to problems with the urinary tract.

Some pills and patches have progestin in them. For those that do not, a progestin or progesterone product need to be taken as well in order to protect the uterine lining. If a woman has had a hysterectomy

use of the progestin/progesterone is not required. Implants, gels, sprays and the Femring® also require progestin/progesterone. The Estring® because of the lower dose, does not.

## **Taking Hormone Therapy**

### *Combined HT*

Pills and patches are forms of combined (estrogen and progestin/progesterone) HT. This can be recommended for women who are experiencing menopausal symptoms and are still having periods, but it can also be used in women who have ceased their menses. Using combined HT usually involves taking a form of estrogen every day of the month and progestin/progesterone is added for only part of each month. It is meant to mimic the natural menstrual cycle and patients may have light or menstrual-like bleeding on the days the progestin is not taken.

### *Continuous Combined HT*

Continuous HT involves taking both estrogen and progestin/progesterone daily. While there is usually no “period,” irregular bleeding can occur the first few months, but usually subsides within a year. Spotting or bleeding can sometimes be corrected by adjusting the dose, the regimen, or the type of hormone products used.

It may be necessary to work through several different types of HT, before finding the best solution. It is also possible to prescribe each component of HT separately to tailor the mix of hormones to each individual's needs. It's important to consult a healthcare provider to learn more about HT's benefits and risks in order to choose the appropriate and most effective regimen.

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