



## **Experts Urge Women To Protect Themselves From Postmenopausal Health Risks**

**Philadelphia, PA, June 20, 2003** - Millions of postmenopausal women are at increased risk for osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease and other health conditions, according to a panel of experts who spoke at a Hormone Foundation media roundtable today. The physicians met to discuss women's health options in light of recent studies, including the Women's Health Initiative (WHI) study, that have shown that estrogen/progestin therapy increases the risks of blood clots, stroke and heart attacks, breast cancer and dementia in postmenopausal women. The new findings have left postmenopausal women confused about the risks and benefits of hormone therapy to treat menopause symptoms.

As a result of last year's WHI findings, millions of postmenopausal women stopped using combination hormone therapy. Additionally, many physicians say they are concerned about whether postmenopausal women are taking appropriate steps to protect their health against diseases like osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease, for which they are at higher risk.

"One of the goals of the Hormone Foundation is to inform and empower women and their physicians to make sound decisions about managing various aspects of their health," said Robert B. Jaffe, MD, President, the Hormone Foundation. "We believe this is particularly important given the past year's findings about hormone therapy."

### **Menopause Increases Women's Risk for Osteoporosis**

Because hormone therapy may protect against bone loss, women stopping hormone therapy should be aware that they may be at risk for fractures associated with osteoporosis. Clinical studies have shown that significant bone loss can occur in postmenopausal women as early as the first year after discontinuation of hormone therapy, and that women can lose up to 5 percent of their bone mass per year in the first 5 years following menopause. Because losing bone mass may put a woman at risk for osteoporotic fracture, fracture prevention is the primary goal for osteoporosis treatment.

"Women who stop hormone therapy should have their bone mineral density measured and then work with their physicians to determine next steps, based on their risk for fracture," said Ethel Siris, MD, professor of clinical medicine, Columbia University.

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"Fortunately, there are other agents, as well as lifestyle changes, that can help maintain bone strength safely, and women need to discuss these options with their physicians."

### **Risk of Cardiovascular Disease Also Increases after Menopause**

Each year, cardiovascular disease (CVD) takes the lives of more women in the U.S. than breast cancer. The risk of CVD increases in women after menopause, and by age 60 heart disease becomes as common in women as in men. The increase in risk following menopause suggests that estrogen made by the ovary prior to menopause may protect against heart disease. However, recent studies have shown no benefit to the use of postmenopausal hormone therapy in heart disease prevention and indicate the need to use other modalities to help women fight heart disease.

"Although women worry most about dying of breast cancer, heart disease is the leading cause of death for women in the U.S.," said Ellen Seely, MD, Director of Clinical Research, Endocrinology, Diabetes and Hypertension Division, at Brigham and Women's Hospital. "Many women and health care professionals, however, still think of heart disease as a problem primarily for men. An increase in the awareness of the importance of heart disease for women can allow women to partner with their health care professionals in efforts to prevent and treat heart disease especially in the years following menopause."

### **Alternate Treatments Are Available**

The panel emphasized that there are treatments that can prevent and treat osteoporosis and fight cardiovascular disease (CVD). The U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) has approved non-hormonal treatments to prevent and treat osteoporosis, including bisphosphonates, selective estrogen receptor modulators (SERMs), parathyroid hormone (PTH) and calcitonin. Statins, a class of drugs that lower lipids in the blood, have been shown to lower the risk of CVD in individuals with abnormal circulating lipids and those who have a family history of heart disease. Several studies have also shown that small doses of aspirin on a daily basis can reduce the risk of heart disease.

The panel also emphasized that a healthy lifestyle is one of the key elements in managing menopause, protecting oneself against osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease, and maximize the effectiveness of medications for these conditions. A healthy lifestyle for postmenopausal women includes: a balanced diet, including calcium and vitamin D; weight reduction if overweight; stopping or cutting down on smoking; weight-bearing exercise, and a yearly mammogram and breast examination by a health professional.

### **Short-term Use of Hormone Therapy to Treat Menopause Symptoms**

Short-term hormone therapy is approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in younger women for some symptoms of menopause, including hot flashes, vaginal dryness and painful intercourse, and the new findings do not directly address decisions about such treatment. The panelists urged women of any age to consult with a physician

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about their individual risks and benefits with hormone therapy. However, women should discuss this option with their physicians, to determine the lowest effective dose possible. The panel also pointed out that the data discussed referred to the estrogen/progestin combination therapy study, and that the estrogen-only study is still in progress.

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*The Hormone Foundation, the public education affiliate of The Endocrine Society, is a leading source of hormone-related health information for the public, physicians, allied health professionals and the media. Our mission is to serve as a resource for the public by promoting the prevention, treatment and cure of hormone-related conditions through outreach and education. ([www.hormone.org](http://www.hormone.org))*