

The hormone story

Higher amounts of estrogen in the blood may increase a woman's breast cancer risk. During her lifetime, a woman is exposed to hormones. From the first menstrual period until menopause, estrogen and progesterone stimulate normal breast cells. It is this lifetime exposure to hormones that may increase risk. For example, starting your period before age 12, having your first child after age 35 or going through menopause after age 55 increases your risk. Other hormone-related risks are described below.

Birth control pills (oral contraceptives)

Current or recent use of birth control pills slightly increases risk. Once a woman stops taking the pill, the risk lowers and disappears after about 10 years. The effects of lower-dose birth control pills, and the low-dose "mini-pill" are under study. We do not know yet how these pills affect risk. More research is needed.

If you take some form of birth control, check with your doctor about your personal risk of breast cancer.

Menopausal hormone use

During menopause, a woman's body makes much lower amounts of hormones than when she had periods. Low levels of estrogen may cause hot flashes, bone loss, vaginal dryness and mood swings. To help lessen side effects, your doctor may prescribe short-term use of menopausal hormones. Longer-term use of estrogen plus progestin increases breast cancer risk.

This risk declines over time once a woman stops taking hormones. Findings on menopausal hormone use (with estrogen alone) are mixed. Some show these hormones increase breast cancer risk and others do not. Any woman currently taking or considering menopausal hormones should ask her doctor about the risks and benefits.

Related terms

Estrogen — A hormone produced primarily by the ovaries that aids in developing female sex organs and in regulating monthly menstrual cycles

Hormone — A substance that helps regulate body functions

Menopause — The time in a woman's life when menstrual cycles stop and the level of estrogen in her body decreases

Oral contraceptive (birth control pills) — Hormone-based drugs used to prevent pregnancy or help regulate a woman's menstrual cycle

Osteoporosis — A disease in which bones become less dense and may break more easily

Menopausal hormones — Hormone-based drugs given to women to help control the effects of menopause

Progesterone — A hormone that is released by the ovaries during every menstrual cycle and helps prepare a woman's body for pregnancy

Progestin — A synthetic progesterone-like drug.

But what about...

- the effects of estrogen when breast cancer cells are already present?

Although it still has not been proven that estrogen directly causes breast cancer, estrogen may help some cancer cells grow when the tumor is already present in a woman's body.

- the risk of breast cancer for women who are currently taking birth control pills?

Studies have shown current or recent use of birth control pills slightly increases breast cancer risk. Most of these studies were done on older, higher dose forms of the pill. There is not enough research to know whether or not “mini-pills” affect breast cancer risk the same as other types of birth control pills.

- women who have stopped using birth control pills? Should they be concerned about their risk of breast cancer?

Once stopped, the risk decreases over time. After about 10 years of not using birth control pills, a woman's risk is the same as a woman who never took the pills.

- the benefits of birth control pills in preventing pregnancy and reducing the risk of ovarian cancer?

Together with her doctor, each woman must weigh the risks and benefits of taking birth control pills — making a decision based on the information available.

- the benefits of menopausal hormones in reducing the symptoms of menopause?

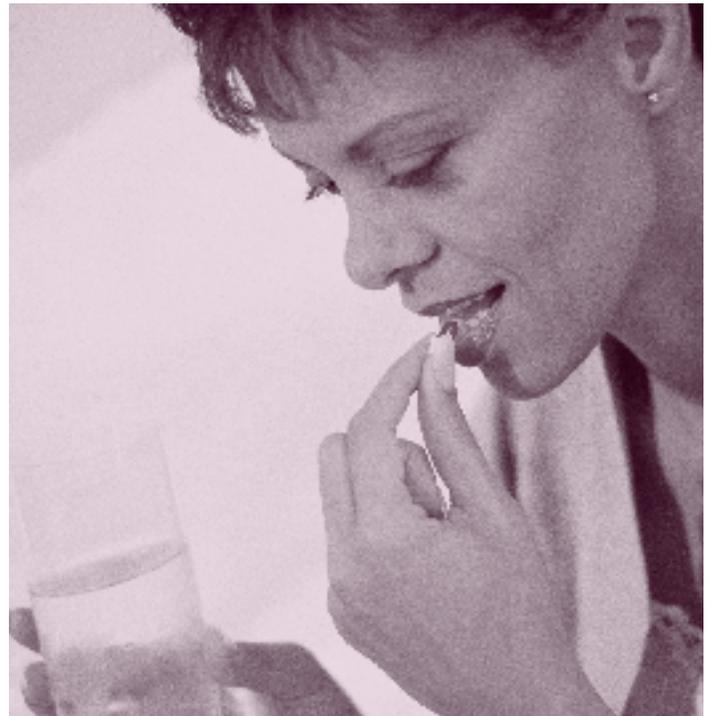
Each woman must weigh the pros and cons of taking menopausal hormones. They are approved for the short-term relief of menopausal symptoms. But, they should be used at the lowest dose and shortest time needed that eases symptoms. There are other things you can do to manage these symptoms. Each woman should discuss all options with her doctor and make an informed decision.

- women who have already been diagnosed with breast cancer? Why are they taken off menopausal hormones?

Some doctors are concerned that exposure to added estrogen may increase the risk of breast cancer recurring. Talk to your doctor about your personal risk.

- women who have a family history of breast cancer?

There is no clear reason for women at high risk of breast cancer to avoid birth control pills or menopausal hormones. However, this area is under study. Discuss with your doctor how your family history may affect your risk.



Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Cancer Risk Factors
- Breast Cancer Resources
- Medical Vocabulary
- Types of Breast Cancer Tumors
- What is Breast Cancer?