

Stop Taking Prempro, Doctors Warn Estrogen/Progestin HRT linked to Breast Cancer, Heart Disease, and Stroke By Daniel Denoon

July 9, 2002- Women should stop taking a popular form of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) doctors warn. The warning applies to prempro as well as other oral, high-dose combinations of estrogen and progestin (not progesterone).

A huge clinical trial of Prempro-The Women's Health Initiative came to a screeching halt on May 31. Plans to continue the trial until 2005 have been scrapped. Five-year data show that Prempro increases a woman's risk of breast cancer, heart disease, and stroke. The trial predicts that one in 100 women will have a bad outcome from long-term Prempro use. These risks are small, but they outweigh the drug's benefit of reduced hip fracture and colon-cancer risks.

The study results and an accompany editorial were released early and will appear in the July 17 issue of The Journal of the American Medical Association. The editorial advises doctors to stop prescribing combination estrogen/progestin (HRT). "The whole purpose of healthy women taking cancer researchers Suzanne W. Fletcher, and Graham A. Colditz, MD, Dr. PH." The results of this study provide strong evidence that the opposite is happening for important aspects of women's health, even if the absolute risk is low. "Given these results, we recommend that (doctors) stop prescribing this combination for long-term use."

Tobert Bonow, MD. President of the American Heart Association agrees with this opinion. The AHA advises that women do not start or continue combined HRT for the prevention of coronary heart disease," Bonow says in a news release.

Many women take HRT to relieve the symptoms of menopause. Might short-term treatment bypass the risks? The study wasn't designed to answer this question, but it offers some relevant information. Study co-author Ross Prentice, PhD, is director of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center's Public Health Sciences Division in Seattle.

"We did see evidence of increased risk of coronary heart disease quit early," Prentice tells WebMD. "If Prempro is used for the relief of menopausal symptom, the time period should be as short as possible, or a lower dose may be appropriate for some women.

Another part of the Women's Health Initiative continues. This study looks at the use of oral estrogen alone-premarin, the second most commonly prescribed medicine in the United States because estrogen alone increases a woman's risk of uterus cancer, and the long-term Premarin study enrolls only women who have had a hysterectomy (removal of the uterus). Prentice says that women in this trial are being sent letters assuring that, so far, there is no significant evidence of an increased risk of breast cancer with Premarin. Why? Profit is paramount, or is it true that estrogen acts differently in Canada?

The authors of the study, note that the findings may not apply to other HRT's. Low dose estrogen/progestin combinations may be safer, although further study is needed. Transdermal HRT's use the patch to slowly release hormones into the skin. These may also be safer. Prempro uses progestin, which is a man-made hormone. The patch uses progesterone, the natural hormone. The patch slowly lets hormones seep into the bloodstream, by passing the digestive system and the liver. This is more like the body's normal way of releasing hormones. Again, more study is needed.

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