

THE SCOTSMAN
Thu 19 Apr 2007



Women using HRT patches have reported a vast improvement in quality of life during and after the menopause.

Picture: Jacky Ghossein

Women on HRT 'are 20% more likely to get cancer'

LYNDSAY MOSS (lmoss@scotsman.com)

WOMEN who take hormone replacement therapy are at substantially increased risk of dying of ovarian cancer, according to a shocking new report.

The study of almost a million women found that HRT increases the risk of getting ovarian cancer by 20 per cent.

Researchers believe the therapy is responsible for 1,000 deaths between 1991 and 2005.

Millions of women across the world still take HRT to reduce unwanted symptoms of the menopause, such as hot flushes, night sweats, mood swings and depression.

The new report is the latest in a series of findings linking HRT to increased risk of cancer, heart attacks and strokes, which have seen the number of prescriptions issued halve from two million a year to one million.

The scientists behind yesterday's study said that it "clearly demonstrated" the cancer risks of taking HRT. Women concerned by the findings were urged to contact their GPs.

However, health campaigners criticised the research for frightening women unnecessarily.

The latest findings, from a "Million Women Study" and published in the *Lancet*, focused on 948,576 post-menopausal UK women, representing a quarter of women aged 50 to 64.

About a third of the women were undergoing HRT, while a further fifth had received treatment in the past. All were monitored for up to seven years.

During this time, 2,273 women developed ovarian cancer and 1,591 died.

From this, the researchers, funded by Cancer Research UK, calculated that for every 1,000 women taking HRT, 2.6 developed ovarian cancer over five years - compared with 2.2 per 1,000 in women who did not use HRT.

They estimated that HRT use was likely to have resulted in an extra 1,300 cases of ovarian cancer and 1,000 deaths from the disease between 1991 and 2005.

About 7,000 women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer each year. The study found the risk of ovarian cancer increased by 20 per cent among HRT users, but was higher still when taking into account other cancers.

The Million Women Study - the largest of its kind in the world - has already linked HRT with a greater risk of breast and endometrial cancer - cancer of the lining of the womb.

The three diseases account for almost 40 per cent of all cancers in women in the UK and 25 per cent of deaths. "The effect of HRT on ovarian cancer should not be viewed in isolation, especially since use of HRT also affects the risk of breast and endometrial cancer," the researchers said.

"The total incidence of these three cancers in the study population is 63 per cent higher in current users of HRT than 'never users'.

"Thus, when ovarian, endometrial and breast cancer are taken together, use of HRT results in a material increase in these common cancers."

The risk of cancer is thought to increase the longer HRT is used, leading experts to recommend that it is used for as short a time as possible.

The study found that the risk of ovarian cancer increased regardless of which kind of HRT women were using - oestrogen-only or oestrogen and progestogen. But it also found that women's risk of ovarian cancer returns to normal a few years after stopping use of HRT.

The lead researcher, Professor Valerie Beral, of the University of Oxford, said: "The results of this study are worrying, because they show that not only does HRT increase the risk of getting ovarian cancer, it also increases a woman's risk of dying of ovarian cancer. This study, along with our previous research, clearly demonstrates the cancer risks of taking HRT."

Professor John Toy, medical director of Cancer Research UK, said: "This study clearly shows that taking HRT increases a woman's chance of getting ovarian cancer and her chances of dying from the disease.

"Considering this alongside the increases in risk for breast and endometrial cancer, women should think very carefully about whether to take HRT.

"And women who choose to take HRT should aim to do so for clear medical need and for the shortest possible time."

But Dr John Stevenson, of Women's Health Concern, accused the researchers of frightening women and overstating the risks of HRT. "It is showing a very small increased risk," he said. "They have done a study over a few years, but have extrapolated the figure over 14 years to make it sound important. This is just substituting science with sensationalism."

Ovarian Cancer Action said it was concerned about the link between HRT and cancer. But the group said it appeared that less than 2 per cent of all ovarian cancers could be attributed to HRT.

Annwen Jones, the charity's chief executive, added: "Given the overall increased risk of developing breast, endometrial or ovarian cancer, Ovarian Cancer Action suggests that women concerned should discuss these results with their doctor.

"In particular, it is important that women neither stop nor start taking HRT without seeking medical advice."

Professor Sean Kehoe, spokesman for the charity Wellbeing of Women, said the increased risk of cancer needed to be balanced against the potential effects on quality of life when ceasing HRT. "If a woman does not want to carry this extra risk, then of course, from the information presently available, stopping HRT seemingly reduces this."

Menopause issues outweighed risk

CAROL Morton knows what it feels like to live with ovarian cancer, wondering whether the treatment will work and, if it does, whether the disease will return.

Since she was diagnosed with the disease in 1999, the cancer has come back twice.

During this time the 59-year-old from Nairn has also had to decide whether she should continue taking hormone replacement therapy (HRT) as more and more research has linked the treatment to a higher risk of cancer.

Ms Morton said that if the research now published had been available when she was first offered HRT, she would have thought twice about using it.

"After my surgery and chemotherapy, I went into full remission," she said. "But then, in 2003, the cancer returned in my abdomen.

"Again the treatment was successful, but then it came back again last year."

Ms Morton is receiving treatment and is confident that she will again beat the disease.

She was first offered HRT after treatment for cancer. It is often given to women after they have had their ovaries and womb removed to combat the symptoms of menopause.

"When concerns were first raised about HRT and cancer, I tried to come off it a couple of times," she said.

"But the menopausal symptoms were so bad and it affected my quality of life so much that I went back on it.

"I felt that the symptoms were causing me more of a problem than the slight risk of cancer."

But as more research emerged, Ms Morton said she tried again to quit HRT.

"I got twitchy about it and thought I should stop as I had been on it for quite a long time at that point.

"I came off it gradually and have been off HRT for about two years now."

Ms Morton said that charities such as the Eve Appeal and Ovacome had been invaluable in offering advice about HRT and support when coping with the disease.

Q & A: WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH MEAN FOR YOU?

What is hormone replacement therapy (HRT)?

HRT is the artificial replacement of the female hormone oestrogen in women who are going through the menopause. Symptoms of the menopause include hot flushes, night sweats, mood swings and depression. HRT can reduce these symptoms.

What types are available?

Most women take a combination of oestrogen and progestogen. The progestogen is added to protect against womb cancer. Oestrogen alone may be prescribed to women who have had a hysterectomy. It can be taken in a variety of forms, including patches, gels, creams and implants.

How long do women need to take HRT for?

This will vary from person to person. The advice to GPs is to review medication on an annual basis. Experts advise that the treatment is not used for longer than five years.

What concerns have been raised about HRT?

Since 2002, research has raised concerns that HRT may be linked to serious side-effects. A study in the United States found it increased the risk of heart attack and strokes. In 2003, the Million Women Study showed a link between HRT and breast cancer, followed by a link with endometrial cancer - cancer of the lining of the womb.

Is research on HRT all bad?

No. Earlier this month a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association said HRT actually reduced the risk of heart attacks in women in their fifties and the increased risk was only in older women. Others have suggested the risks identified in the studies are small compared with the overall benefits of using HRT.

What does the latest study show?

The latest findings suggest that between 1991 and 2005, an extra 1,300 cases and 1,000

deaths from ovarian cancer were linked to HRT use. During this period, 105,000 women in the UK will have been diagnosed with the disease.

What should women taking HRT do if they are concerned about this research?

Women worried about their medication should make a non-urgent appointment with their GP to discuss the situation. Doctors say as long as women are having their medication reviewed regularly, they should not worry.

Related topics

- [HRT](http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=466)
<http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=466>
- [Cancer research](http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=115)
<http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=115>

This article: <http://news.scotsman.com/scotland.cfm?id=600742007>

Last updated: 19-Apr-07 11:32 BST

Related Links

Hot Flush

Learn about Hot Flush.

www.ShopicA.com

Find Hot Flushes

The Most Popular Sites for Hot Flushes.

www.upspiral.us

Ebay.com - Save Money and Buy Hot Flushes

On Ebay

Find Hot Flushes products and anything you are looking for on Ebay. O...

www.ebay.com

Bored? Check Out the Sumo!

Viral video mayhem. Games Galore. Sucker free music. Bandin' Hotties. ...