Who Needs Hormones?

According to new data, more women than previously thought—perhaps even you. by GALE MALESKY

Seven years ago, the National Institutes of Health Women’s Health Initiative broke the bad news that hormone replacement therapy could increase the risk for breast cancer, heart disease, stroke, and blood clots. Women and their doctors dropped the therapy in droves, preferring hot flashes to cancer or heart disease.

In the years since, WHI data have been further analyzed. The results show that the risk for breast cancer doesn’t appear until after two to three years of HRT, and that women who begin HRT within 10 years of the onset of menopause have less risk of heart disease from the therapy than women further into menopause.

Those findings have led to a significant new recommendation: short-term use of 3–5 years in younger women only—those between ages 50 to 60 or so—who have moderate to severe hot flashes, vaginal dryness, or who are at high risk for osteoporosis but can’t take other drug treatments.

The trend is also toward the lowest dose that’s still effective, says Dr. Jacques Rossouw, WHI project officer. And HRT is now more likely to be given in patches, which deliver the drugs through the skin rather than orally, eliminating the need for them to pass through the liver before entering the blood. This reduces the likelihood of blood clots and allows for a smaller effective dose.

The decision to take HRT is one to be made in consultation with your doctor. Just make sure you both weigh the pros and cons carefully. This is also a decision in which a second opinion can be warranted.

What about bioidentical hormones?

There is quite a divide between “regular” doctors who prescribe pharmaceutical HRT such as Premarin and Prempro and “alternative” doctors who prescribe bioidentical hormones—those natural compounds chemically identical to hormones, says Dr. Ken Holtorf of the Holtorf Center for Hormone Imbalance in Torrance, California. Regular doctors contend there’s no proof that bioidenticals are safer than synthetics. By proof they mean a large, long-term study like the WHI. In that regard, they are right. But doctors such as Holtorf say there are many well-executed smaller studies, and years of clinical practice, to show that bioidentical hormones are safer. Lots of doctors dabble in natural hormones, but to find an expert, look for one who is board-certified in anti-aging medicine. Use the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine Web site, worldhealth.net.