

## ALTERNATIVES TO HRT

This sheet is not comprehensive and is intended as an initial guide for women about some of the alternatives to taking Hormone Replacement Therapy. More detailed information can be obtained from the number of books and web sites listed at the end of this sheet.

### Preventing Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis can be protected against by taking Hormone Replacement Therapy, however there may be some women who do not want to take it for many reasons. They may be in a high risk category for Breast Cancer or they may be at risk of Thrombosis. Or they may just not like taking drugs.

Calcium is vitally important in the health of the bones and extra calcium after the menopause may help to reduce the loss of bone that occurs. It is as important to get adequate amounts of Vitamin D as this is used by the body as a bone strengthener and allows the body to absorb calcium effectively. Vitamin D is usually made naturally by the body when it is exposed to sunlight and it can also be found in fish, egg yolks and cereals. However those that find it difficult to get out in to the sun may find that taking supplements helps. A study in France has suggested that supplements of 800 units of Vitamin D3 and 1,200mg of Calcium had the effect of reducing fractures by 25% <sup>1</sup>

You need to be taking at least 1,000mg of calcium per day, although a joint study; by the office of Population and Census, MAFF and the Department of Health in the UK; in 1990 showed that the average daily intakes for women had fallen to 730mg <sup>2</sup>. There are many foods that are very rich in calcium although those that are non dairy are less easily absorbed than the calcium that you get from milk, fish (canned such as sardines and pilchard), hard cheeses (such as cheddar) and yoghurt. If you are a vegan you should be able to supplement your diet effectively with regular brazil nuts, almonds, green leafy vegetables, dried fruit, fortified soya milk, cereals and bread, although these may be less easily absorbed.

There are also a number of treatments for osteoporosis if you develop the disease. You will need to discuss these with your GP they are only available under medical supervision. They include Calcitonin supplementation, Bisphosphonates and Anabolic Steroids.

Calcitonins are hormones that are naturally produced by the thyroid gland and work by stopping bone loss by blocking the actions of osteoclasts, the cells that break bone down. At present they are available for treatment with injection and nasal spray (the nasal spray has not yet been approved in the UK).

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Biophosphonates inhibit bone loss by attaching themselves to the bone and preventing the osteoclasts from working effectively. They are available as tablets under the name "etidronate" and have been used to treat both Paget's disease and spinal osteoporosis.

Anabolic Steroids have been used to build up muscle and bone mass, they are used only with caution as they can cause women to become more masculine with long term use (over three years) and can also increase the risk of heart disease and extreme fluid retention.

### **Preventing Heart Disease**

Arterial disease such as Heart Disease and Stroke are the most common causes of death amongst post-menopausal women in the UK. In 1987 in England and Wales approximately 65,000 women die from heart disease and 45,000 from stroke, compare this with the 18,000 deaths from breast cancer and you will understand the risk.

It is essential then that if you are unable or unwilling to take Hormone Replacement Therapy you can reduce any risks by stopping smoking, reducing your weight, and taking exercise. Taking care with your diet is also important and there is some evidence that increasing your calcium intake can help to lower blood pressure. You can use semi or skimmed milk, low fat yoghurt's and cheeses and increase other sources of plant calcium's from nuts, bread, cereals and leafy green vegetables.

The vitamins A, C and E are known as the anti-oxidant vitamins and play a key role in helping to keep your heart healthy. They help to reduce damage to the blood vessels by free radicals. Vitamin E also reduces damage to the good LDL (lower density lipoprotein) cholesterol. Recommended levels by Dr Sandra Cabot 3 are:

- 20 mgs of beta-carotene (Vitamin A)
- 4,000 milligrams of Vitamin C
- 100 - 500 international units of Vitamin E

It has also been suggested that by giving soya protein together with oestrogen, there may be an added increase in the ability to help or prevent heart disease. This is a medical paper and highly technical. It takes the opinion that soya has an oestrogenic effect and that it can help in the prevention of heart disease. This effect could be greater if taken together with HRT.

### **Natural Plant Oestrogens**

There are over 300 plants that have oestrogens in them and if they are consumed regularly enough they can have a mild effect on women 4. The most potent of the plant oestrogens is Coumestrol even though it is about 200 times weaker than human oestrogen. Because the plant oestrogens have such a mild effect the side effects found with conventional HRT should be avoided. Coumestrol can be found in alfalfa and red

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clover and can be taken either as tea or sprouted. The seeds must be obtained from a reputable herbalist or health food shop.

Other good sources natural oestrogens are soya beans, soya bean sprouts and crushed linseeds. To vary the diet try to include good helpings of apples, beets, cabbage, carrots, chick peas, cucumbers, green beans, oats, olives, parsley, potatoes, rhubarb, rice, sesame seeds and sunflower seeds. There are many others but those on this list should be readily available from high street shops.

### **Other Dietary Supplements**

Supplements that are particularly useful for women going through the menopause can help protect against some of the dangers of oestrogen deficiency and help to relieve some of the more unpleasant symptoms. They include nutritional therapies, vitamins, essential fatty acids, minerals and amino acids.

For osteoporosis have a look for the special formulations for bones that contain calcium and vitamin D together with other minerals. A good multivitamin supplement can also help to maintain healthy levels of all body nutrients to ensure that everything works as it should. Vitamin B6 has been recommended for women that had pre-menstrual syndrome and is also useful for women going through the menopause, remember that the two conditions are caused by the same hormone, oestrogen. Essential fatty acids can be obtained from starflower and evening primrose oil supplements.

Here's Health magazine 5, published four steps to a natural menopause, it includes reducing stress as this affects the endocrine system that controls hormone balance, blood sugar levels, energy levels and calcium balance; using essential fatty acids so that the body can produce prostaglandin's to help maintain a healthy hormone balance; vitamin and mineral supplementation particularly of vitamin C, B3, B6, zinc and magnesium, again this combination will help to maintain healthy hormone balances; general healthy lifestyle with eating well and exercising

### **Books**

- Marilyn Glenville; Natural Alternatives to HRT
- Linda Kearns; Eat to Beat Menopause
- Leslie Kenton; 10 Steps to a Natural Menopause
- Kitty Champion; Menopause Naturally

### **Web Sites**

- Menopause Online - <http://www.menopause-online.com/treatments.htm>

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**UK Organisations**

The Amarant Trust  
11 – 13 Charterhouse Buildings, London, EC1M 7AN  
0891 660 620

Womens Nutritional Advisory Service  
PO Box 268, Lewes, BN7 2QN  
01273 487 366

**References**

1. Dover, C; Ward Lock Family Health Guide - Osteoporosis; p 43
2. Dover, C; Ward Lock Family Health Guide - Osteoporosis; p 51
3. Cabot, Dr S; The Menopause Handbook; p 153
4. Setchell, K.D.R.; Non steroidal estrogens of dietary origin: Possible roles in Hormone Dependent Disease; American Journal of Clinical Nutrition; 40; pp569 - 78