

## **Controversy on HRT**

### **Latest news from Women's Health Initiative**

In July 2002 The American National Health Institute made a widely reported statement on HRT after The Women's Health Initiative (WHI) stopped a large study that appeared to be showing that the risks of taking HRT outweighed the benefits. Whilst the study had confirmed the already recognised higher risk of invasive breast cancer for women taking HRT, it also found evidence of a higher risk for coronary heart disease, stroke and pulmonary embolism, thereby challenging the consensus of opinion. However, the previously recognised lower risk for colorectal cancer and decrease in osteoporosis when taking HRT were confirmed.

The WHI study showed that in a group of 16 000 women taking combined progesterone/oestrogen HRT, eight more will be affected by breast cancer, seven more by heart attack, eight more by strokes and 18 more by thrombo embolus than in a group of women not taking HRT. In the case of breast cancer it is still uncertain whether HRT may be responsible for an acceleration in the growth of already existing cancer cells. However, breast cancer in women taking HRT is better differentiated and less aggressive and therefore more amenable to treatment.

It is still too early to reach a conclusion about the balance of risks and benefits of HRT as, in the majority of women, HRT provides long-term benefits to their quality of life by the alleviation of symptoms and longevity by reducing the risk of complications arising from osteoporosis. At this stage oestrogens remain the most effective therapy for the symptoms of menopause.

The advice:

Women taking HRT should not stop taking the medication but first discuss this with their doctor.

The WHI study largely found negative effects of combination HRT and not the administration of oestrogens alone.

Oestrogen only HRT is indicated only in women who have undergone hysterectomy.

Osteoporosis can be treated with alternatives to HRT but these will not relieve the uncomfortable symptoms of menopause.

Oestrogens are the only source of HRT known to relieve the uncomfortable symptoms of menopause