

Bioidentical Hormone Replacement Therapy (BHRT) Position Paper

As a primary care physician who specializes in natural medicine, I think the most important role doctors can play is that of teacher – to provide complete, unbiased information so that patients can make their own informed decisions. Following is a list of facts I provide my patients when they seek help for hormone-related symptoms:

- Many women and men have significant symptoms as they age.
- No two people are identical in terms of their hormone production or the symptoms they experience.
- Eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly, minimizing stress, and avoiding environmental toxins are the foundations for preventing and managing hormone-related symptoms.
- If symptoms persist, hormone replacement is an option that contains benefits and risks.
- People have different medication needs and drug detoxifying capacities. Testing baseline hormone levels and following up with repeat testing after treatment is a reasonable way to determine whether a patient is receiving too much hormone. Symptom improvement usually determines if a patient is receiving enough medication.
- Synthetic hormones (especially Provera) have been shown to have serious health consequences including increased risk of breast cancer, blood clots, heart disease, and stroke. Synthetic oral testosterone has been shown to increase the risk for liver inflammation and liver cancer.
- Bioidentical hormones are identical in structure to those made by the body. There is a large body of research involving the effectiveness of bioidentical estradiol, progesterone, and testosterone [please see references]. Bioidentical hormones do carry risks, especially when administered in excessive dosages, outside of physiological levels; overall, however, they have a lower risk profile than their synthetic counterparts (this is especially true for bioidentical progesterone vs. progestins, and bioidentical testosterone vs. methyltestosterone). More research about long-term effects of bioidentical hormones needs to be done.
- Bioidentical hormones are found in pharmaceuticals (e.g., bioidentical estradiol patches such as Climara or Vivelle, bioidentical progesterone such as Prometrium, and bioidentical testosterone such as Androderm, Androgel, or Testopel) as well as in individual preparations made by compounding pharmacists.
- Compounded medications have been available since the 1930s. Organizations such as the Professional Compounding Centers of America (PCCA) provide continuing education seminars for pharmacists and physicians, as well as a source of FDA-approved ingredients subjected to quality assurance standards.
- Treating hormone imbalances requires a comprehensive understanding of endocrinology and gynecology, as well as significant clinical experience.

I also share the following opinions with my patients:

- It makes sense to test baseline hormone production, and then if low levels and/or hormone-related symptoms deem necessary, to prescribe low dosages of bioidentical hormones that eliminate or minimize symptoms, or to bring a patient's hormone levels to within physiological range. There is no established protocol for such treatment and potential risks exist; therefore, a conservative approach to treatment is most prudent.
- Choosing an experienced physician who listens, provides you with information, and respects your treatment decisions is your right and responsibility. Expect your physician to provide you with available research, benefits, and risks of any treatment you choose. Do not be afraid to question any treatment or to make your own healthcare decisions.