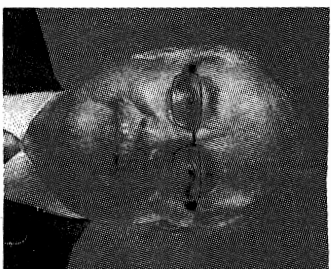


15⁺ Women's health corner

Brand name hormone products offer safest option

Pharmacist-prepared hormone therapy products could be missing important information, package inserts and warning language regarding adverse effects and complications.



by **Richard Boroditsky**

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Magazines, websites, and even Oprah Winfrey are buzzing about an issue that has become controversial and somewhat confusing: are hormones safe for women?

Bioidentical hormone therapy (commonly known simply as hormone therapy) has become a hot topic among women who are going through menopause. Programs like the Victoria General Hospital's Mature Women's Centre receive daily requests for hormone testing, hormone profiling and prescriptions for compounded hormone therapy products.

There are two kinds of hormone therapy: industry-produced and pharmacist-produced, the latter more commonly referred to as "compounded". They are both plant-derived and chemically altered (synthetic). Industry-produced hormone therapy products have been approved and regulated by Health Canada. They include hormones such as estrogen and progesterone, to alleviate the symptoms of menopause, including hot flashes. These government-approved, extensively-tested medications are designed to duplicate, and are identical to, the hormones naturally produced by women's own bodies. They are available as brand name prescription drugs.

Compounded hormone therapy products involve menopausal hormone preparations that have been compounded for an individual by the pharmacist according to a doctor's prescription as an alternative to Health Canada-approved hormones. The products are plant-derived and synthetic like the industry-produced products. Many of these products, though, have not

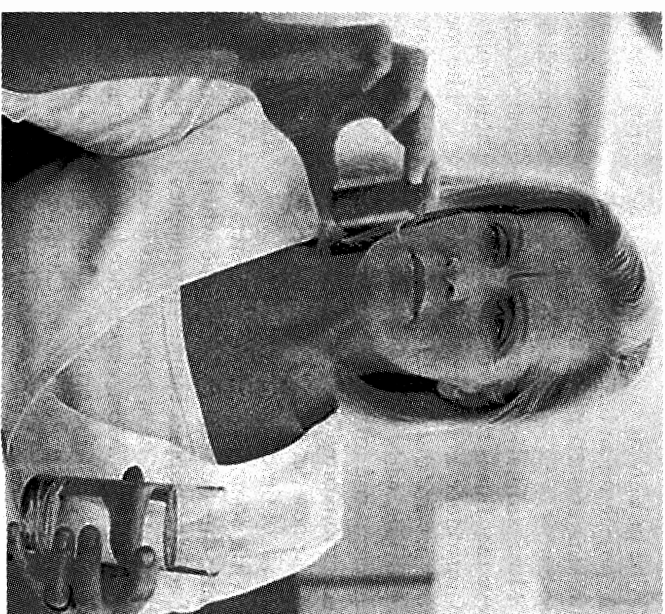
been properly tested to determine appropriate dosing, regimens and route of administration.

Both product formulations have similar risks and benefits. Compounded hormone therapy products are not regulated by Health Canada and are not subject to the same labeling requirements as their industry-produced counterparts, so women using these products may assume they are safe. These products could be missing important information, package inserts and warning language regarding adverse effects and complications. As these products require a physician's prescription to be dispensed by the pharmacist, it is the physician who ends up bearing the sole responsibility for adverse effects and outcomes should they occur.

Such adverse outcomes have occurred in the use of compounded hormone therapy. A report at the September, 2009, North American Menopause Society meeting describes two women who developed uterine cancer while taking compounded hormone therapy. More cases have been reported.

Hormone testing and hormone profiling, carried out before the doctor prescribes compounded hormone therapy, and the compounded product itself add a significant and unnecessary financial burden compared to industry-produced products. These tests are not necessary and of no clinical significance prior to prescribing hormone therapy.

Some patients today are averse to trusting their health care professional and the products of the pharmaceutical industry and prefer to put their trust in a compounding pharmacist who is near at hand. While compounded hormone therapy may seem like a popular method for treating menopausal symptoms, there is no scientific evidence that this method is more effective



For compounds, the label may not tell the whole story.

than traditional products and may in fact add risk if not properly monitored.

For more information on bioidentical hormone therapy, visit www.maturewomenscentre.ca

Dr. Richard Boroditsky is medical director of the Mature Women's Centre at Victoria General Hospital. The Mature Women's Centre provides a range of services utilizing a nurse-managed, interdisciplinary team approach, with an emphasis on health promotion and disease