

Natural (Bioidentical) Hormones for Women and Men

Natural or bioidentical hormones are the same hormones naturally found in our bodies. The postmenopausal hormone replacements we used most commonly in the past were synthetic hormones without the exact chemical structure as hormones naturally occurring in our bodies. Large studies 5 to 10 years ago showed mild increases in cancer and cardiovascular risks with these synthetic hormones. We therefore stopped recommending them routinely for postmenopausal women (commonly for bone health and menopause symptoms). There have been no large studies on natural hormones and risks, because they do not have the funding of large drug companies because they are generic. When searching whether women should or should not be routinely on postmenopausal natural hormones, you can find experts solidly on either side. While I continually review literature and my experience with patients, I feel the decision of whether to be on natural hormones needs to be on an individual basis in consultation with your own knowledgeable physician. If your physician does not know about natural hormones, then seek a consult with a reputable physician who does (and even a nutritional specialist like pharmacist Jeff Jackson, chiropractor Dr. Ed Zimmer, and more). We are not taught about natural hormones in medical school, so this has to be acquired by Family Physicians, Gynecologists, Urologists, and Internists and others.

Women and Men both go through menopause – where our natural hormones decrease enough to cause symptoms. This hormonal decrease begins for each sex in their thirties. For most women, symptoms do not start until their forties and are a result from decreasing progesterone, testosterone, and estrogen. There are many possible symptoms for women, including hot flashes, night sweats, fatigue, sleep disorders, mood changes, inability to concentrate/fuzzy thinking, vaginal dryness, decreased libido, dry skin, weight gain, joint aches, decreased muscle and more. For most men, symptoms do not start until their fifties or even sixties and are a result from decreasing testosterone. The symptoms in men are low energy/fatigue, decreased libido, erectile dysfunction/weaker and fewer erections, mood changes and poor concentration, reduced muscle mass/strength, and increased body fat.

I suggest trying natural hormones for my female and male patients if they are having some of the above symptoms which bother and impact their lives. They can always stop the hormones if they do not like them enough for their effects, expense, and time. I first check blood hormone levels, and then discuss the hormone preparation options. Once they decide to try hormones, then I recheck levels after a couple months and see them in follow-up. If their symptoms and their hormone levels are in a good range, I just check them again at their yearly physicals. (Some specialists check saliva tests or fingertip blood tests, and each have their benefits.)

The costs of natural hormones vary, depending if your insurance plan covers them and what type you choose. For Men, they only usually need testosterone replacement, and this can be by a topical gel, patch, or injection. Testosterone cannot be well absorbed by our GI system, because the liver rapidly metabolizes it before it can get into our blood stream. This is why testosterone requires topical absorption or injection. Most men choose topical testosterone (usually 50mg/day) because we can get more consistent testosterone levels with topical absorption. There are drug company branded testosterone gels Testim and Androgel and patch Testoderm. These cost well over \$100/month, but are often paid for by insurance companies with branded co-payments (you need to check with your own plan). You can also purchase quality testosterone gels from custom pharmacies like Custom Med Apothecary, and a month supply costs a little over \$50. The gels are applied in the morning to the chest and upper arms, and usually significantly help with the male menopause symptoms.

Women commonly need all three hormones, estrogen, and progesterone, and testosterone (especially if libido issues or low bone density) once they are in full menopause. Prior to this, many women can benefit from only progesterone the last ½ of their cycles to help with PMS symptoms and pain with their periods. Testosterone (usually 0.5mg/day) for women is not made by any drug company, so it must be acquired from a custom pharmacy and is about \$20-25/month. This can be applied in the morning to the arm or even to the clitoral area. Natural estrogen can be purchased in pill form, or as cream applied to skin or troches dissolved between gums

or vaginally. The pill form, estradiole (1-2mg/day), is less expensive, but only has one of the body's natural estrogens. The tri-estrogen troches (.125 - .25mg bid) or creams have all three of the body's natural estrogens and help more for symptoms including vaginal dryness. These are only from custom pharmacies and cost about \$15-25/month. Natural progesterone taken nightly (helps with sleep and other symptoms), comes in a brand name pill form, prometrium, and custom cream. Prometrium (100mg/night) is expensive unless your insurance company pays well for it. Progesterone cream (usually 30mg/day) is about \$20-25/month from a custom pharmacy.