Could Hormone Therapy For MS Help?

by BRENDA VANTA

Researchers Delve Into Hormone Therapy for MS

Estrogen therapy is recommended primarily for the management of menopause, but new research shows potential benefits of this therapy for MS as well. Recent studies have found that estrogen combined with the drug Copaxone (used for relapsing forms of MS) can help improve the MS symptoms. Let's take a look at hormone therapy for MS.

Promising Findings

The research, funded by the National Institutes of Health, involved over 150 MS patients diagnosed with relapsing remitting MS. Patients received both Copaxone and either the estrogen hormone (in the form of estriol, 8 mgs) or a placebo every day over a two-year period. After one year, patients who received Copaxone and estrogen had experienced a greater decrease in relapse rates compared with those who received the MS drug and dummy pills. However, after two years the difference in symptom improvement between the estrogen and control group was not as significant.

The study was a Phase II trial, and therefore more research is needed before the benefits of estrogen for MS can confirmed.

Previous studies have also found estrogen beneficial for MS because it protects the nerve cells from being damaged, and also reduces inflammation. During pregnancy, many MS patients note improvement in the symptoms, and during this period estrogen (in the form of estriol) levels are higher.

Concerns

While it appears to help manage MS, be aware that there are some concerns about estrogen therapy. Higher levels of estrogen are not always accompanied by better health, for example in breast cancer, endometrial cancer, fibroids, endometriosis, and active liver diseases.

Side effects of estrogen therapy vary. Some are mild, like nausea, bloating, some weight gain, fluid retention, mood swings, breast tenderness and bleeding. In other cases, estrogen therapy has been associated with an increased risk of cancer (breast, endometrial), blood clots and gallbladder diseases. Because of these possible risks, a doctor will order several tests (including urine tests, a lipid profile, blood glucose levels, ultrasound, EKG, Pap test, mammography) before prescribing estrogen therapy.

Other Hormone Therapies in Research

Testosterone is also being studied for MS management. Past research papers show that testosterone can decrease the chances or severity of certain autoimmune diseases in male patients. When used in females, testosterone has the potential to ameliorate autoimmune diseases. Testosterone also reduces the inflammation

by reducing the levels of pro-inflammatory substances such a TNF and IL-1. The long-term safety of testosterone therapy is also debated, as it may increase the risk of cardiovascular events.

Hormone Therapy in MS

Hormone therapy shows potential benefits and we may see future treatments for MS based on these hormones. As usual, your doctor will consider both the advantages and disadvantages of a new therapy. In the meantime, follow the treatment recommended by your healthcare professional and keep an eye on the news.