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Professor urges caution regarding HRT study

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

Despite the findings of a recent study that concluded combined estrogen plus progestin (a synthetic progesterone) cause an increased risk of breast cancer and other detrimental effects in healthy postmenopausal women, OU Professor of Biological Sciences and Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost Virinder Moudgil urges that women consult their physicians before changing their hormone replacement therapy (HRT) treatments.

"The findings of the Women's Health Initiative study have received the widest publicity of any hormone issue over the past several months," Moudgil said. "This new study must be seen as an important but singular finding. Before women start changing their health priorities in terms of hormone replacement therapy, they must discuss, with their physician, if any such changes are warranted."

The multi-center trial was stopped early by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI) of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) after findings showed a 26 percent increase of breast cancer, a 29 percent increase in heart attacks, a 41 percent increase in strokes, a doubled rate of blood clots and a 22 percent increase in total cardiovascular disease. The study did find reductions in colorectal cancer and fractures, but was halted when it was determined that the number of invasive breast cancer cases in the estrogen plus progestin group crossed the boundary that signaled an increased risk. The study of more than 16,000 women, ages 50 to 79, was scheduled to run until 2005, but was stopped after an average follow-up of 5.2 years. About 6 million women in the United States are taking estrogen plus progestin for a variety of medical reasons.

"The effects of hormones on our bodies are very well known," Moudgil said. "What is not known is the mechanism – how hormones accomplish these functions. Estrogen and progesterone are the primary steroid hormones released by women's ovaries during her reproductive years. If we know the precise mechanism of steroid hormone action, it will allow us to regulate the positive and negative influences of hormones. The recent WHI study has brought to the fore concerns regarding the employment of hormone replacement therapy for post-menopausal women."

Among the most desired effects of HRT, Moudgil said, is the promotion of calcium absorption and retention, which is heavily influenced by a woman's estrogen. For many years, women who have adopted HRT have benefited from the hormone action in maintaining bodily functions, including bone strength and the prevention of osteoporosis.

"Although the WHI study is important and recommends caution in the use of hormone replacement therapy, one must be reminded that over many years it has been considered relatively safe and of benefit to women," Moudgil said. "In fact, estrogen and progestin are the main ingredients in some widely used birth control pills."

"Scientifically and clinically, additional supportive studies must present information as to the validity of both claims: the benefits or risks of hormone replacement therapy. We must wait for more studies to provide verification or suggest caution."

Hormone research at Oakland University is well established internationally. Since 1978, OU has hosted several worldwide conferences on the subject, which have attracted some of the world's finest leaders in the study of hormone action. Over many years, OU faculty, undergraduates, graduates and post-doctoral students at OU have performed research on steroid hormone action, including what researchers call the "mechanism" of hormone functions.

SUMMARY

Despite the findings of a recent study by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute that concluded combined estrogen plus progestin cause an increased risk of breast cancer and other detrimental effects in healthy postmenopausal women, OU Professor of Biological Sciences and Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost Virinder Moudgil urges that women consult their physicians before changing their hormone replacement therapy.

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