Breast Cancer + Alzheimer’s risk from SINthetic menopause hormones will last decades

A new generation of women entering menopause now may not be aware of landmark findings from 2002 that tied higher breast cancer rates to hormone pills combining estrogen and progestin.

By Associated Press

Part 1. -- SAN ANTONIO — Women who use certain types of hormones after menopause still have an increased risk of developing breast cancer nearly two decades after they stop taking the pills, long-term results from a big federal study suggest.

Although the risk is very small, doctors say a new generation of women entering menopause now may not be aware of landmark findings from 2002 that tied higher breast cancer rates to hormone pills combining estrogen and progestin.

“The message is probably not clear” that even short-term use may have lasting effects, said Dr. Rowan Chlebowski of Harbor-UCLA Medical Center in Torrance, California. He discussed the new results Friday at the San Antonio Breast Cancer Symposium. The results are from the Women’s Health Initiative, a federally funded study that tested pills that doctors long thought would help prevent heart disease, bone loss and other problems in women after menopause. More than 16,000 women ages 50 to 70 were given combination hormone or dummy pills for five to six years.

The main part of the study was stopped in 2002 when researchers surprisingly saw more heart problems and breast cancers among hormone users. Women were advised to stop treatment but doctors have continued to study them and have information on about two-thirds.

With roughly 19 years of follow-up, 572 breast cancers have occurred in women on hormones versus 431 among those on dummy pills. That worked out to a 29 percent greater risk of developing the disease for hormone takers.
Still, it was a difference of just 141 cases over many years, so women with severe hot flashes and other menopause symptoms may decide that the benefits of the pills outweigh their risks, doctors say. The advice remains to use the lowest possible dose for the shortest time.

Why might hormones raise breast risk?

“The hormones are stimulating the cells to grow” and it can take many years for a tumor to form and be detected, said Dr. C. Kent Osborne, a Baylor College of Medicine breast cancer expert.

Women are prescribed hormones in combination because taking estrogen alone raises the risk of uterine cancer. However, one-quarter of women over 50 no longer have a uterus and can take estrogen alone for menopause symptoms.

So the same study tested estrogen alone versus dummy pills in more than 10,000 such women, and the conclusion was opposite what was seen with combination hormones. Women on estrogen alone for seven years had a 23 percent lower risk of developing breast cancer up to 19 years later. There were 231 cases among them versus 289 in the placebo group.

These results contradict what some observational studies have found, though, and doctors do not recommend any hormone use to try to prevent disease because of the murky picture of risks and benefits.

The federal study only tested hormone pills; getting hormones through a patch or a vaginal ring may not carry the same risks or benefits.

The results are another reason that hormone users should follow guidelines to get regular mammograms to check for cancer, said Dr. Jennifer Litton, a breast specialist at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston.

“Continuing to screen appropriately remains important,” she said.
Long-term use of synthetic hormone therapy pills linked to increased Alzheimer's risk, study finds

For the short-term management of postmenopausal symptoms like hot flashes, night sweats and disruptive sleep the benefits seem to outweigh the risk, experts say.

By Shamard Charles, M.D.

Part 2, Long-term use of oral hormone therapy may be associated with a small increased risk of Alzheimer's disease in postmenopausal women, researchers reported Wednesday.

The Finnish study looked at nearly 85,000 postmenopausal women, between the ages of 70 and 80, diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease between 1999 and 2013. The researchers found that use of oral hormone therapy for 10 or more years in women who started the pills before age 60 had a nine to 17 percent increased risk for Alzheimer's disease. Women who used vaginal hormone therapy showed no increased risk.

Prior research has indicated that hormone therapy reduces the risk of vascular dementia.

“It prompted us to do research on Alzheimer's disease to see if the same results persisted, but it doesn’t look like hormonal therapy provided a protective effect on Alzheimer's,” said lead author Dr. Tomi Mikkola, supervisor for the obstetrics and gynecology doctoral program in clinical research at the University of Helsinki.

The specific reasons behind this increased risk are elusive, but biological differences between Alzheimer's and vascular dementia may be one reason why, Mikkola says.

“Alzheimer's is a completely different type of disease, we don't know the mechanism behind the disease. What we know is that the disease has started decades before we see symptoms of memory loss,” said Mikkola.
It is possible that the hormone therapy speeds up progression of the disease, he added.

Alzheimer’s disease is the sixth-leading cause of death in the United States. Nearly 6 million Americans have been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s — two-thirds are women — including 200,000 under the age of 65. By 2050, experts predict that this number will rise to nearly 14 million, according to the Alzheimer’s Association.

“Given the lack of effective Alzheimer’s treatments and increased prevalence of the disease, medical and public health efforts have focused on primary prevention, including risk factors and preventive strategies, especially to women,” said Dr. JoAnn E. Manson, chief of the Division of Preventive Medicine at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, in an editorial written in response to the study.

“But the findings should not be a cause for alarm. For the short-term management of hot flashes, night sweats and disruptive sleep the benefits of hormone therapy seem to outweigh the risk.”

In recent years, considerable attention has been given to the role of menopausal hormone therapy. Two 2017 studies found that the period when a woman starts to produce less estrogen, usually in her 40s, may be a critical point in whether she’ll go on to develop Alzheimer’s or not. Researchers concluded that the hormone estrogen is protective for a woman’s brain, stimulating growth and keeping it healthy. But the natural drop in estrogen during menopause means women lose that layer of protection.

Both Mikkola and Manson agree that most women under 60 are safe to use short courses of hormone therapy for menopause symptoms.

“Women should not use hormone therapy for the expressed purpose of trying to improve memory or reduce cognitive decline, but when used for early menopause the benefits are sure to outweigh the risk for short term treatment,” said Manson.

Because the study was observational, it isn't definite that long-term hormone therapy causes Alzheimer's disease. Other risk factors, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, or having the APOE gene weren't included in the study — these may have also contributed to many of the women's increased dementia risk.

“Women should not be scared to use hormone therapy if needed,” Mikkola told NBC News. “Women who use hormone therapy for symptom relief have a much better quality of life.”

The study was published Wednesday in BMJ.