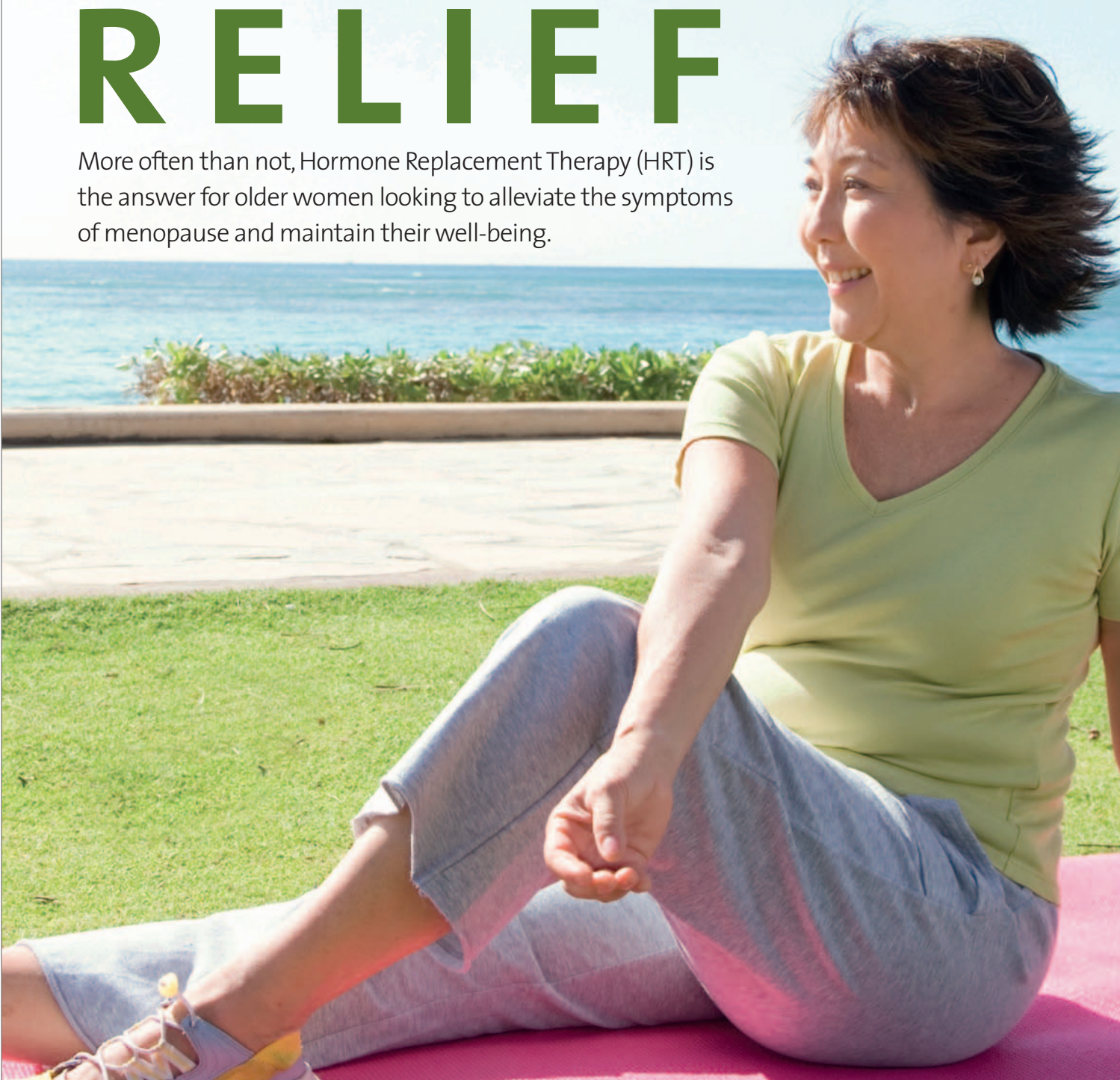




# WHAT A RELIEF

More often than not, Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) is the answer for older women looking to alleviate the symptoms of menopause and maintain their well-being.



BY MICHELLE BONG

**W**omen in their 50s and up are well aware of how their bodies are changing. They may experience hot flushes (feeling weak and faint while the body seems to be burning up), night sweats (extreme perspiration levels that may require them to change their bedding) and back pain. Along with mood swings, falling sex drives and incontinence, these are just some of the day-to-day reminders that they are undergoing menopause.

Menopause is a hormonal condition that comes about because as women age, their estrogen levels fall when their ovaries stop producing eggs. At the same time, progesterone levels also drop because the body no longer needs it to prepare the womb for pregnancies.

Different women respond to menopause differently. For some, life goes on as usual and they try to continue enjoying the lifestyles they have created over the years. But for others, menopause can be a debilitating time that affects the way they eat, sleep or rest. For these women, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can be recommended to provide relief.

Essentially, HRT is a form of treatment that replenishes the body's lost hormones — specifically estrogen and progesterone. By introducing these hormones to the body via HRT, uncomfortable conditions such as hot flushes, disturbed sleep and vaginal dryness can be minimised.

### TYPES OF HRT

HRT may be administered in the form of a pill, patch, gel, vaginal cream or implants. Unless the uterus has been removed, another hormone (progesterin) will also need to be taken to protect the womb lining. A combination of the two is available only for oral preparations, so those who are taking non-oral estrogen have to, in addition, take oral progestins.

Women who are within the first one or two years of menopause are usually given HRT, which will cause regular menstruation again, while those who are more than two years past their menopause can enjoy menstruation-free HRT. Regular checkups are done every six months for blood pressure monitoring, to assess symptom relief and address any concerns. Pap smears and mammograms are also done annually.

Treatment is tailored to each patient, and there is no hard and fast rule about when to stop the treatment. However, it is believed that the risks (see sidebar) increase after five years of HRT use, and at the end of five years, patients are advised to try to stop the medication or switch to other medications if symptoms persist. Most experts agree that the short-term use of HRT will ensure the benefits outweigh any associated risks. ❖❖❖

## SHOULD YOU GO FOR HRT?

**HRT comes with several side effects, but these can be managed in various ways.**

According to Dr Anupriya Agarwal, the side effects of HRT include the following:

- ▶ Slightly increased risk of blood clots, associated primarily with oral estrogens.
- ▶ Increased risk of gallbladder disease, associated primarily with oral estrogens.
- ▶ Breast pain (often a temporary problem).
- ▶ Nausea, associated primarily with oral estrogens.
- ▶ Bloating and fluid retention, mood changes primarily associated with progestins such as medroxyprogesterone acetate.
- ▶ Slightly increased risk of ovarian cancer.

However, recent analysis of major studies on the use of HRT suggests that there are several ways to reduce these inherent risks.

### 1. START EARLY

The risk of hormone therapy causing heart disease is not significantly raised in women under the age of 60. In fact, some studies suggest that estrogen may protect the heart when taken early in the menopausal years.

### 2. MINIMISE THE AMOUNT OF MEDICATION

Use the lowest effective dose for the shortest amount of time needed to treat symptoms.

### 3. FIND THE APPROPRIATE DELIVERY METHOD

Since HRT can be used in the form of a pill, patch, gel, vaginal cream or implants, find the ideal way to administer it. For instance, if relief from isolated vaginal symptoms is needed, estrogen in a vaginal cream or tablet is usually a better choice than a pill or a skin patch.

Dr Anupriya Agarwal, Associate Consultant of the National University Hospital's Department of Obstetrics & Gynaecology, stresses that the use of HRT is currently recommended only for women who are suffering from moderate to severe menopausal symptoms.

"HRT is not recommended for the sole purpose of prevention of osteoporosis, heart attack, strokes or memory loss," she cautions. "Also, women with breast cancer, heart disease, stroke or a history of blood clots should not take hormone therapy for relief of menopause symptoms."

Dr Agarwal adds that severe menopausal symptoms are less common among Asian women and the proportion of women taking HRT in the West is higher than in Asian countries.

### PROS & CONS

On top of relieving physical symptoms such as hot flushes and night sweats, HRT brings with it several health benefits. It is known to ensure the prevention of osteoporosis, reduce the risk of dental problems such as tooth loss and gum disease, lower the risk of colon cancer and maintain skin collagen levels (which fall along with declining estrogen levels). If used in recently menopausal women, it has also been shown to provide some protection against heart disease and stroke.

Menopausal women who experience pain during sex due to vaginal dryness will also find that HRT subsequently helps improve their sex life. Women who have very low libido after menopause can consider male hormonal (testosterone) preparations or Livial, a different type of HRT, as a complementary aid.

But at the same time, HRT also involves certain side effects (see sidebar). Dr Agarwal says that ultimately, a healthy lifestyle is important whether one uses HRT or not. There is no special diet or lifestyle change required if a woman wants to start HRT.

### LOOKING GOOD

To remain healthy through menopause and beyond, Dr Agarwal recommends eating sensibly. "The diet should be low in fat, rich in fruits and vegetables, and incorporate the consumption of multivitamins and a calcium supplement to combat osteoporosis."

Women should also get regular exercise as studies have shown that women who are more active tend to be less affected by menopausal symptoms. For instance, practicing



### WHERE TO GET HELP

#### NATIONAL UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL

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yoga regularly may help reduce the severity of menopausal symptoms. "Exercise at least 30 minutes, most days of the week," she advises. Cigarettes are best avoided and alcohol should be consumed in moderation.

For those who aren't keen on the use of conventional HRT, help can also come in the form of herbal remedies which contain certain estrogen-like chemicals (called phytoestrogens). Dr Agarwal highlights that several herbs are known to be effective. Black Cohosh has been found to reduce hot flushes and night sweats for some women while St John's Wort and chasteberry may help some women with depression. But contrary to belief, ginseng, cordyceps, evening primrose oil, and red clover seem to have little or no effect on menopausal symptoms. However, the long-term effects of these medications are not known and should be used judiciously and under medical supervision.

With new medical studies ongoing, it is hoped that HRT will continue to help women all over the world age gracefully as they enter their twilight years. With professional advice based on information about their history of family illness and personal lifestyle patterns, these women can carry on living life to the fullest. +

**"HRT IS NOT RECOMMENDED FOR THE SOLE PURPOSE OF PREVENTION OF OSTEOPOROSIS, HEART ATTACK, STROKES OR MEMORY LOSS. ALSO, WOMEN WITH BREAST CANCER, HEART DISEASE, STROKE OR A HISTORY OF BLOOD CLOTS SHOULD NOT TAKE HORMONE THERAPY FOR RELIEF OF MENOPAUSE SYMPTOMS."**