

# HEALTHY LIVING

## Time in a bottle?

'Ageless' pitchwoman Somers touts bioidentical hormones

BY CAROLYN SUSMAN  
Cox News Service

It's been five years since the spigot to the hormone fountain of youth was practically turned off, leaving millions of women clueless about fighting off nasty symptoms of menopause such as hot flashes, vaginal dryness, depression and weakening bones.

Since hormone replacement therapy in the form of a pill — Prempro — got a black eye in 2002, all sorts of replacements have been proposed. Even though the national study that decked hormones with one swift punch now has re-evaluated its data and says women age 50 to 59 can take them for short time periods with relative safety, many women don't want anything to do with them.

The use for newly menopausal women was reconfirmed in the June issue of The New England Journal of Medicine in a study that showed women who took estrogen suffered less hardening of the arteries than those who took dummy pills.

Perhaps the greatest growth industry that has sprung from this hormonal confusion is the network of people advocating bioidentical hormone therapy.

Advocates claim this therapy — which uses individually mixed creams and gels made from plants such as yams and soy — is "natural" and unlikely to result in the negatives, such as breast cancer, previously associated with using Prempro.

There are medical experts on both sides of this issue, but forget doctors of any stripe. We have actress Suzanne Somers, 60, author of "Ageless, The Naked Truth about Bioidentical Hormones" (\$25, Crown Publishers) stirring this pot with her best-seller that's been out just a few months. She calls bioidentical hormone replacement therapy "the juice of youth."

Somers, who bills herself as "one of the most trusted and respected brand names in the world," has reinvigorated the conversation and triggered a round of reactive punches against bioidenticals and her own qualifications to write about them.

The debut of her book resulted in a scathing editorial in Menopause Management, a publication of the North American Menopause Society, by Dr. Wulf Utian, its executive director.

Utian's remarks are aimed at the medical community, cautioning doctors to watch out for this "potentially dangerous therapy" based on "pseudoscientific principles" and lacking sufficient scientific testing.

"It's time to tell women, 'Buyer beware,'" he writes.

Dr. Neil C. Boland, an obstetrician/gynecologist from Stuart, Fla., who also is a North American Menopausal Society certified menopausal practitioner, backs up Utian.

"So-called bioidentical hormones are not FDA-approved for anything but are touted by Hollywood pitch people as identical to what Mother Nature makes," he says. "Not only do bioidenticals offer no advantage to patients, but without FDA approval, they are potentially quite dangerous. In addition to safety issues, there are significant medication compounding issues with purity and sterility."



A 2002 study that labeled estrogen pills risky gave hormone replacement therapy a black eye and led to other treatments such as bioidenticals.



PHOTO BY ERIC WILLIAMS / COX NEWS SERVICE

Suzanne Somers calls bioidentical hormone replacement therapy "the juice of youth." The 60-year-old has written a book about the subject: "Ageless, The Naked Truth about Bioidentical Hormones."

But doctors who have been practicing this type of therapy for years say caution is already a byword.

"I started using bioidenticals about 1982," says Dr. Neil Ahner of Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., who refuses to use the company line about the products being natural. "They come from yams, soy-based. We don't call them 'natural,' they're made in a lab."

Previously an internist before turning to dispensing bioidentical hormone therapy, Ahner is excited that the "bios" — unlike pills — bypass the liver and deliver renewed energy and reduced menopausal symptoms.

One of Ahner's patients, 59-year-old Pam Strickland of Singer Island, Fla., says the treatment has worked for her. After a hysterectomy at 39, she was prescribed an estrogen patch and Premarin, a pill combining estrogen and testosterone. After initial good results, she said, everything eventually quit working. That's when she turned to bioidenticals.

"I would never take the others (synthetic hormones) again because I think anything that goes through your liver every single day is not good for you," Strickland said.

One pro-bioidentical group, Boca Raton, Fla.-based BodyLogicMD, says that "when giving estrogens orally, the effect on the liver is to increase the proteins that clot your blood, thereby increasing your risk for blood clots and strokes."

The company claims on its Web site — www.bodylogicmd.com — that this risk disappears with creams because they are absorbed through the skin.

What works and what doesn't with this method isn't always felt immediately.

In fact, it can take awhile — about three months — to balance the hormones in the body, the progesterone and testosterone and estrogen that women produce naturally until the body starts shutting them off.

Even the way this balancing is done, through saliva testing and blood tests, has been controversial.

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the national medical organization representing more than 49,000 doctors who provide health care for women, says tailoring the creams through saliva testing "isn't meaningful because salivary hormone levels vary within each

woman depending on her diet, the time of day, the specific hormone being tested and other variables."

And the organization still stands by the statement it issued in 2005, questioning claims that these individualized hormones are any safer than the pills like Prempro.

"Given the lack of well-designed and well-conducted clinical trials of these compounded hormones, ACOG recommends that all of them should be considered to have the same safety issues as those hormone products that are approved by the FDA," it says.

Despite the controversy, women report positive results with the therapy.

Gypsie Kolenski of Jupiter, Fla., has been receiving bioidentical hormone therapy from Ahner, the Palm Beach Gardens physician.

"It's been absolutely the best thing. The hot flashes have ceased. I sleep all night. It's been absolutely wonderful," said Kolenski, 56, who had been on estrogen pills since having a hysterectomy at 30. "For my husband to notice the change in me, it was great."

Strickland, another of Ahner's patients, echoed those sentiments.

"It's mostly about the way I feel," she said. "I know there's still questions, but I know what life is like without hormones. I will take them till the day I die." ■

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