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Replacing replacements

By Hope Yen
ASSOCIATED PRESS

The government's halt of a trial of a hormone-replacement drug has created a rush of marketing by businesses that say they can help meet the needs of menopausal women seeking relief for everything from hot flashes to dry skin and a lack of sexual vitality.

"Baby boomers are a more enlightened population who are used to asking questions," said Wulf Utian, executive director of the North American Menopause Society (NAMS). "But there's also almost a morbid fear of getting older. So for anyone out there who says they have a remedy for aging, there's a real potential for a short-term bonanza."

The National Institutes of Health decided last month to halt a study involving Prempro, a combination of estrogen and progestin, citing increased risks of breast cancer, strokes and heart attacks if the drug is taken long term. The decision is prompting many baby boomer women to rethink their use of hormone-replacement therapy. Jean Golub, 52, of Shaker Heights, Ohio, is one of those women.

She said she has never tried anything but hormone-replacement therapy to alleviate the mood swings and osteoporosis concerns brought by menopause. But now she is taking a different view.

"I had always thought, here is something that's a fix that works and is good. So for me, the pros were always much greater than the cons," she said. "I'm questioning that now."

Before NIH's decision, 6 million women were using the estrogen-progestin combination, which earned Prempro-maker Wyeth about \$900 million in sales last year. And

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millions more will be seeking some kind of treatment in the next decade as an estimated 4,900 boomer women start menopause each day, according to Entrepreneur magazine.

"This is a hot market," said Rieva Lesonsky, the magazine's editorial director, who predicts increased interest in vitamins, beauty and skin products, menopause books and even looser clothing.

"Entrepreneurs are saying, 'How can I get my part of this?'" There's no question that this is going to be a lucrative market for at least the next 15 to 20 years," she said.

One group hoping to quickly fill the void is the herbal-supplement industry, which already caters to about 30 percent of menopausal women, according to NAMS. Black cohosh, for example, has been used extensively in Europe for hot flashes, and NIH is studying the herb as menopause therapy.

The Dietary Supplement Education Alliance is putting out a video news release this month aimed at discussing the NIH's hormone-replacement study, which found that over time, Prempro increased women's risk of stroke by 41 percent, heart attack by 29 percent and breast cancer by 26 percent.

The industry is hoping that the video, which discusses alternative treatments and will be sent to news organizations across the country, might feed greater interest in supplements.

Transitions for Health, a Portland, Ore., maker of products such as a cooling mist and towelettes for hot flashes and Pro-Gest, a natural progesterone cream, reports a 25 percent increase in sales volume in July over last year.

It is stepping up marketing, with full-page advertisements planned in publications such as Ladies' Home Journal, Health and Oprah Winfrey's O magazines. The company also will dispatch executives on speaking tours to promote their products.

And the International Spa Association, the Lexington, Ky., trade group for health spas, plans to direct some of its marketing toward menopausal women who may have used hormone therapy to boost their feelings of well-being.

"The spa industry is all about serving middle-aged women wishing to look and feel younger," said Dr. Pamela Peeke, the group's medical adviser.

Still, some experts worry that the flurry of marketing could create unnecessary confusion, for example, by the loosely regulated herbal-supplement industry, which can often make general health contentions without solid scientific backing.

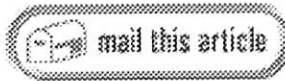
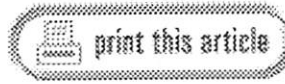
"Unfortunately, we're seeing every snake-oil salesman creep out of the woodwork and attempt to sell anything that goes," Mr. Utian said.

His advice is to read reliable materials on menopause, such as those on the group's Web site at www.menopause.org, so women can ask their doctors specific questions about the best

treatment.

Doctors note that the NIH study did not raise questions about short-term use of Prempro, nor did it explore the effect of dosage or other products using the hormone combination. The Department of Health and Human Services will hold public forums this fall to address some of these questions.

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