

Study: Strong link between hormone use, breast cancer

By Marilyn Marchione
Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Taking menopause hormones for five years doubles the risk for breast cancer, according to a new analysis of a big federal study that reveals the most dramatic evidence yet of the dangers of these still-popular pills.

Even women who took estrogen and progestin pills for as little as a couple of years had a greater chance of getting cancer.

And when they stopped taking them, their odds quickly improved, returning to a normal risk level about two years after quitting.

Collectively, these new findings are likely to end any doubt that the risks outweigh the benefits for most women.

It is clear that breast cancer rates plunged in recent years main-

ly because millions of women quit hormone therapy and fewer newly menopausal women started on it, said the study's leader, Dr. Rowan Chlebowski, of Harbor-UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles.

"It's an excellent message for women: You can still diminish risk (by quitting), even if you've been on hormones for a long time," said Dr. Claudine Isaacs, of Georgetown University's Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center. "

Study results were reported yesterday at the San Antonio Breast Cancer Symposium.

They are from the Women's Health Initiative, which tested estrogen and progestin pills that doctors long believed would prevent heart disease, bone loss and many other problems in women after menopause.

The main part of the study was stopped in 2002 when researchers

saw surprisingly higher risks of heart problems and breast cancer in hormone users.

Since then, experts have debated whether these risks apply to women who start on hormones when they enter menopause, usually in their 50s, and take them for shorter periods of time. Most of the women in the federal study were in their 60s and well past menopause.

So the advice has been to use hormones only if symptoms like hot flashes are severe, and at the lowest dose and shortest time possible. The new study sharpens that message, Chlebowski said.

Even so, most women will not get breast cancer by taking the pills short-term. The increased cancer risk from a couple of years of hormone use translates to a few extra cases of breast cancer a year for every 1,000 women on hormones.

This risk accumulates with each year of use, though.

In the general population, use of hormone products has dropped 70 percent since the study ended in 2005, said another of its leaders, Dr. JoAnn Manson, preventive medicine chief at Harvard's Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

That corresponds with big drops in breast cancer cases, but some scientists have said that this could be because of a fall-off in mammograms, which would mean fewer cancers were being detected, not necessarily that fewer were occurring.

The new analysis puts that theory to rest. Mammography rates were virtually the same among those taking hormones and those who weren't.

Women who do need the pills should not panic, though the doubling of risk — a 100 percent in-

crease — for long-term users is quite worrisome, cancer specialists say. Although the new study does not calculate risks in terms of actual cases, previous research showed that the average increased risk of 26 percent meant a difference of a few extra cases a year for every 1,000 women on hormone pills, compared with nonusers.

"Hormone therapy remains a good health care choice to relieve moderate to severe menopausal symptoms," says a statement from Wyeth Pharmaceuticals, which made the pills used in the study.

"Most women should be able to discontinue hormones in three to four years," or at least reduce their dosages, Manson said.

A future analysis will examine other women in the study who took only estrogen — generally women who have had hysterectomies.