

# In Good Health



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# Menopause aided by bioidentical hormones

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**FOR decades, doctors prescribed their female patients estrogen plus progestin to help alleviate some of the discomforts of menopause.**

Hot flashes, bloating, forgetfulness, mood swings,

night sweats, irritability, breast soreness, vaginal dryness, and weight gain . . . some of the unpleasant symptoms could be held at bay by the hormone replacement therapy: a combination of estrogens made from horse urine and synthetic progestin.

Then, in the summer of 2002, the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute of the National Institutes of Health suddenly called

## Symptoms alleviated by natural hormone replacement therapy

off a major clinical trial of the risks and benefits of the conventional therapy involving 16,608 women ages 50 to 79 years. The study — part of the Women's Health Initiative — had found that the women's health was being compromised.

Specific study findings about the combined estrogen plus progestin included:

- a 41 per cent increase in strokes;
- a 29 per cent increase in heart attacks;
- a doubling of rates of venous

thromboembolism (blood clots);

- a 22 per cent increase in total cardiovascular disease;
- and a 26 per cent increase in breast cancer.

"The scientists stopped the study," explains North Vancouver physician Dr. Shehla Ebrahim. "They felt the risks outweighed the benefits and that it was unethical to continue. There was a real furore in the scientific community."

After the study, says Ebrahim, women felt that they

had two choices: continue with the conventional hormone replacement therapy and face the possible consequences; or stop the therapy and live with the uncomfortable side effects.

But there is another option, she says; one that was introduced to the general public by, of all people, Suzanne Somers, in her book, *The Sexy Years*.

It's called bioidentical hormone replacement therapy.

"It's derived from a plant source, but it is converted in the lab to a molecular structure similar to our body's own hormones," explains Ebrahim. (The conventional synthetic hormones have the structure appropriate for horses, with only approximately 30 per cent identical to human hormones.)

It uses progesterone, not progestin, and different estrogens from conventional

therapy; and the bioidentical hormones are tailored according to each woman's individual needs.

"With conventional therapy, if you have 12 women in front of you, you give them all the same amount and say 'See you in three months.' With bioidentical hormones, we use saliva testing to determine what their needs are. Then we give them only the amount that is needed."

The bioidentical therapy is also delivered in a cream, to be distributed to the body's tissues, rather than a pill, which takes the hormones first to the liver.

Because the therapy is dispensed by a compounding pharmacist, a prescription must be written by a doctor. It's a service that Ebrahim is offering through her new skin and laser centre, Afterglow, located in Westview

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# Beauty and wellness bridged at Afterglow



NEWS photo Victor Aberdeen

*From page 38*

Shopping Centre.

In private practice since 1992, Ebrahim is trained in both western and traditional eastern medicine. Interested in responding to her patients' rising demand for cosmetic and other non-invasive procedures, she began to include cosmetic services in her private practice in 2002.

"I see it as bridging the gap between beauty and wellness," she says. Among the services she offers: botox, chemical peels, medical micro-dermabrasion, photorejuvenation, laser hair removal, soft tissue fillers, treatment of acne and precancerous lesions, treatment of facial scars, mesotherapy for fat reduction, and skin care maintenance programs.

Ebrahim says she is not advocating that her patients

**DR. Shehla Ebrahim, medical director of Afterglow Skin and Laser Centre, is offering menopausal patients the option of bioidentical hormone replacement therapy.**

make wholesale changes to their appearance.

"If you're happy with the way you look don't do anything; but if you want a few tweaks here and there, you shouldn't feel guilty. You look after your car, you look after your house . . . why shouldn't you look after yourself?"

She also points out that life expectancies for Canadians continue to grow.

"And the question is: How do we want to live those years?"

The bioidentical hormone replacement therapy fits in with her philosophy.

"I would say that 90 per cent of the women I have treated have had enormous success.

"But if you read Suzanne Somers and you're coming to see me thinking your wrinkles will go away, and your skin will be softer, and you will feel young and horny, you're on the wrong track. If you're coming to see me thinking it might improve your quality of life . . . that's the right reason."

Afterglow Skin and Laser Centre is located at 104-2609 Westview Dr., North Vancouver. Call 604-980-3993 for more information.