

Comment on the NIH press release concerning the estrogen-only study arm of the WHI

On March 2nd, 2004, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) announced preliminary findings from the estrogen-only study arm of the Women's Health Initiative (WHI), and its memory substudy, WHIMS.

Based on preliminary findings from nearly 7 years of study, the NIH has informed the public that, in the WHI Study, estrogen therapy:

- decreased the risk of hip fracture
- did not increase the risk of breast cancer
- did not increase or decrease the overall risk or benefit of coronary heart disease (CHD) *and*
- increased the risk of stroke, similar to the increase in risk previously reported from the estrogen plus progestin study arm of the WHI.

In the WHIMS substudy of women age 65 years and older, estrogen-only therapy was reported to show a trend towards an increase in probable dementia and mild cognitive impairment. It is important to note that the risk of cognitive decline increases dramatically with age, and WHIMS evaluated women who were, on average, 25 years older than the typical user of estrogen therapy.

As Trudy Bush had pointed out in her last publication in 2001, there is no scientific evidence for estrogens to cause or promote breast cancer; WHI now confirms this.

The decrease in risk of osteoporotic fracture and a lack of adverse cardiovascular impact leave stroke as the main risk, to the order of an additional eight events for every 10,000 women, compared to placebo.

The WHI has been widely criticized because it was primarily a study of older women and only assessed the impact of one type of estrogen and one type of progestin. Most of the women were well beyond menopause and experienced no climacteric symptoms. Thus, the study offered very little information for the typical woman seeking treatment for symptoms. Basic science and observational experience tend to predict preventive effects on the cardiovascular and central nervous systems. These topics will remain the subject of further appropriate research.

The full analysis of the 'estrogen-only' experience in the WHI investigation is not expected for another 2 months. The NIH press release adds full support to the recent IMS Position Statement (*Climacteric* 2004;7:8–11).

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