

How to manage menopause

Since studies have shown the risks of HRT, a woman has to examine safer options

by Genevieve Woo

genevieve@newstoday.com.sg

WHEN hormone replacement therapy (HRT) hit the market some 30 years ago to alleviate the symptoms of menopause, it was touted as a wonder drug. HRT was said to work against heart disease, osteoporosis, Alzheimer's and even prevent you losing your husband to a younger woman.

Wonder drug no more

In July last year, results of clinical trials conducted by the Women's Health Initiative (WHI) in the United States confirmed that women on HRT have increased risk of breast cancer, stroke and heart attacks. But it conceded that women on HRT were less likely to suffer from colon cancer and hip fractures (due to osteoporosis).

Women all around the world were left confused and scared.

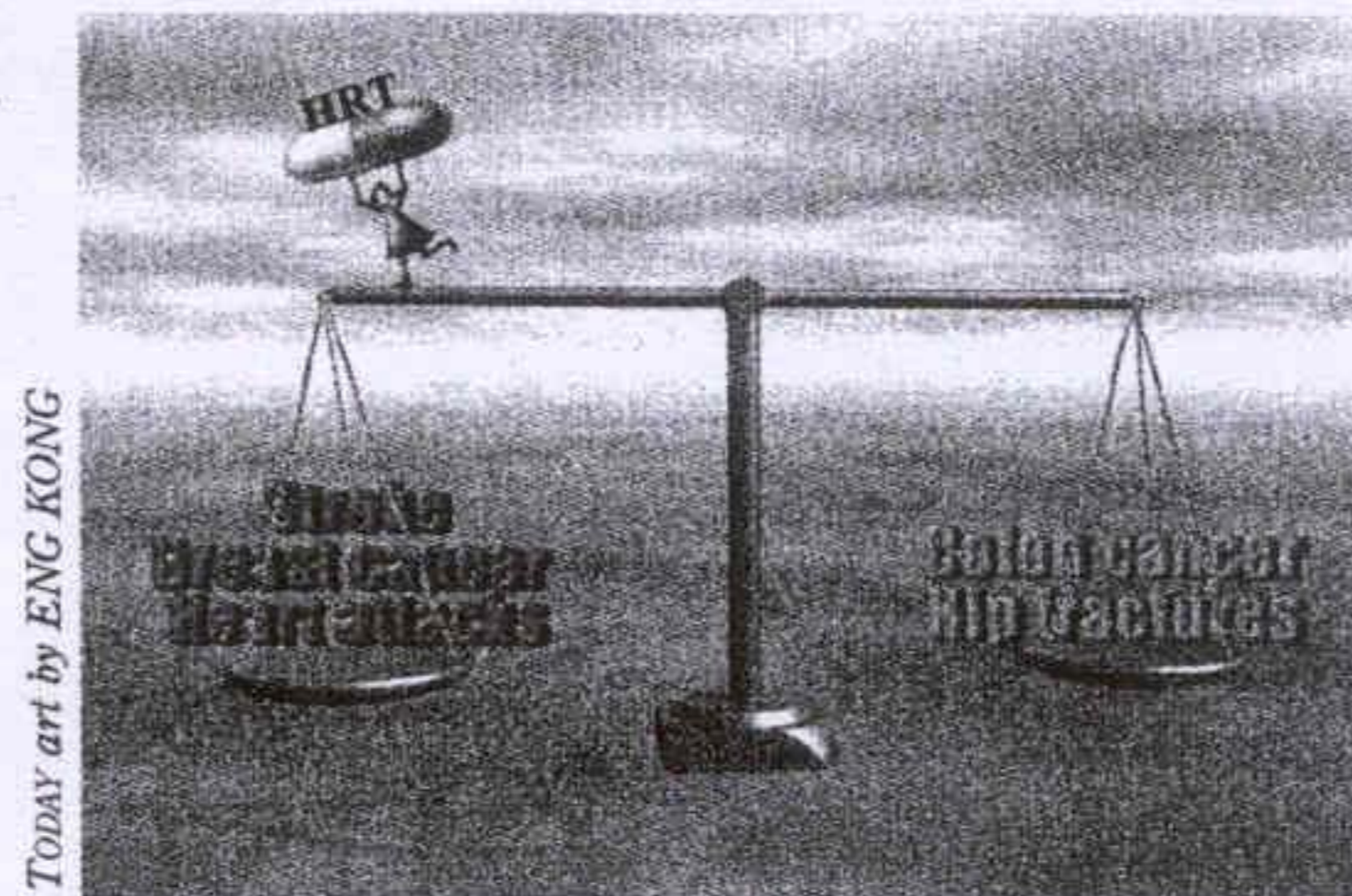
One year on, have the findings changed the management of menopause?

"In responsible practice, no," said Dr Chua Yang, a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist in private practice with a special interest in menopause management.

"If anything, the findings of WHI gives more ammunition to prove that caution has always been the call of the day when it comes to managing menopause."

Not all women who display symptoms of menopause need HRT.

"We need to assess the symptoms and try risk-free



ways of dealing with each of these symptoms," says Dr Chua.

Women who display mild symptoms - occasional sleeplessness, mood swings and lack of energy - can try lifting their levels of endorphins through exercise.

Dietary changes such as avoiding hot drinks and spicy foods may also alleviate hot flashes.

Dr Chua emphasises, "Managing menopause is all about choices. HRT is still a viable option for some," said Dr Chua.

A bony issue

Said Dr Lorraine A Fitzpatrick, professor of medicine at The Mayo Clinic in the United States: "Women who discontinue HRT will lose the bone-health benefits of the drug as soon as they stop taking it."

"Loss of bone mass can lead to osteoporosis and result in debilitating fractures of the hip and spine."

Osteoporosis afflicts an estimated one-third of women aged 60 to 70.

Dr Chua feels that if it is only to treat osteoporosis, the use of HRT is not justified. "There are less risky options ... There are non-hormonal drugs designed specifically for osteoporosis. Again, it's all about having options."

Weaning off

There are women who have been on HRT and swear by the positive effects such as relief of debilitating hot flashes, and even plumper, smoother skin.

Most symptoms of menopause decrease after two years. For women on HRT, it is prudent to go on a lower dosage over time.

"Weaning off is about conditioning the body. We can space out the pills - one in two days for a period of time, and even one in three days later," said Dr Chua.

Menopause is a concept of the 20th century. In the 19th century, the average life expectancy of women was about 47 years. Menopause would not have had a chance to kick in then.

Today, with the average female lifespan increased to 83 years, about one-third of a woman's life is after menopause.

"We have to ensure that these years are healthy and happy. And to do this, we need to know what options are available to women to manage this time of their life," said Dr Chua.

FAST FACTS ON MENOPAUSE

- HRT is the use of prescription drugs to replace the estrogen and progesterone lost during menopause.
- Estrogen is a female hormone that brings about changes in other organs in the body.
- Progesterone is a female hormone that prepares the uterus for pregnancy each month.
- During the transition to menopause ("perimenopause"), these hormone levels start to fluctuate, causing some uncomfortable symptoms. When the ovaries stop producing estrogen and progesterone, menstrual periods cease and menopause ensues.

NEED TO TALK TO SOMEONE?

Menopause can be a difficult transition for some. If you need a listening ear or a deeper understanding of what's happening to you, help is available.

'Woman to Woman' is a menopause support group in Singapore, set up since 1996. The group has about 300

members. Activities include face-to-face counselling sessions, volunteer work and a hotline.

The hotline, 6394-1499, is open on weekdays from 2pm to 6pm. (Since the Sars outbreak, the group's activities have been put on hold. Activities will resume in September).