

Safety of Hormone Therapy for Breast Cancer Survivors

Women's Wellness Center | Columbia Hormone Health

Medical science has made remarkable progress in breast cancer treatment over the past two decades — today, nearly 95% of women diagnosed will survive. It's time to recognize that these survivors deserve not only longevity, but a life of good health, vitality and well-being in the years ahead.

What the Research Shows

Among the **20 clinical studies** conducted between 1980 and 2008, examining use of estrogen/progesterone in breast cancer survivors, only **one** reported an increase in breast cancer recurrence—that study was found to have major design flaws. Other studies found **no increase**, and some showed **reduced cancer recurrence** among hormone therapy users.¹

After WHI was published in 2002, research all but stopped on hormone therapy in breast cancer survivors. However, a meta-analysis of **15 studies** comparing breast cancer survivors who used hormone therapy with those who didn't found:

- **10% fewer breast cancer recurrences** among hormone users
- **Lower 7-year mortality** (4.5% with hormone therapy vs. 17.9% without hormone therapy)

Importantly, most breast cancer survivors **die of cardiovascular disease**, not breast cancer—by more than **sevenfold**.

Withholding hormone therapy for breast cancer survivors increases their risk of heart disease (the number one killer) and overall mortality, while appropriate hormone therapy reduces all-cause mortality and improves quality of life.

Reconsidering the “Estrogen Myth”

The belief that estrogen causes breast cancer is **not supported by scientific evidence**. In fact, multiple findings contradict this assumption:

- ***Breast cancer rates rise after menopause, when estrogen levels have fallen.***
 - ***High-dose estrogen has historically been used to effectively treat metastatic breast cancer.***
 - ***Women using hormone therapy when diagnosed with breast cancer have much better outcomes than those not using hormone therapy at diagnosis.***
 - ***Pregnancy, a time of very high estrogen, does not worsen breast cancer prognosis.***
 - ***The presence of estrogen, progesterone, or androgen receptors in a cancer cell simply means the tumor is hormonally responsive, not hormone-induced.***
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The Role of Testosterone

Testosterone therapy offers a safe and effective option for managing menopausal symptoms in breast cancer survivors. Research shows when testosterone binds to **androgen receptors** in breast tissue, its effect is to **inhibit cell proliferation**, especially in estrogen receptor-positive (ER+) cancers.² Historically, testosterone was successfully used to **treat breast cancer**. The decline of this practice was not due to lack of effectiveness, but to the rise of patentable pharmaceuticals.

- ***For most breast cancer survivors, bioidentical testosterone, progesterone, and/or estradiol can safely relieve symptoms; protect cardiovascular, brain, and bone health; and improve overall survival.***
 - ***Each case should be individualized, but fear should not outweigh the evidence.***
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1. Bluming, A. Z., & Tavris, C. (2018). *Estrogen Matters: Why taking hormones in menopause can improve women's well-being and lengthen their lives—without raising the risk of breast cancer*. Little, Brown Spark

2. Hickey, T et al. ***The Androgen Receptor is a Tumor Suppressor in Estrogen Receptor-Positive Breast Cancer***. *Nature Medicine*, Vol 27, Feb 2021.