

Everyday Health

## Estrogen Products Can Spike Your Blood Clot Risk

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Taking estrogen has the potential to cause blood clots. Here's what you need to know, including what products contain estrogen and how to avoid them.



Drugs and devices that contain estrogen may put you at risk for blood clots.

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### FAST FACTS

Taking estrogen can increase risk of blood clots in women with other risk factors.

Some of those risk factors include lifestyle habits like smoking, not getting physical activity, and being overweight.

If you want to prevent pregnancy or manage menopausal symptoms but can't take estrogen, you have lots of options.

It's fair to say that if you're a woman, you have a love-hate relationship with estrogen. No doubt you've even cursed it dozens, if not hundreds, of times in your life.

Estrogen, after all, is the hormone your body began releasing when you got your first menstrual cycle. The three types of estrogens that women make include estradiol, estriol and estrone. Estrogen's

available in synthetic form via medications, most commonly contraceptives and hormone replacement therapy.

Yet even though estrogen is produced naturally by your body, the synthetic form can pose a serious health threat to some women, raising their risk of blood clots. That can lead to stroke, the development of deep vein thrombosis (DVT), and a potentially fatal condition in the lungs called pulmonary embolism, says cardiologist Nieca Goldberg, MD, medical director of the Joan H. Tisch Center for Women's Health at NYU Langone Medical Center in New York City, and author of *Dr. Nieca Goldberg's Complete Guide to Women's Health*.

## Where You Find Estrogen

Although every medication, including birth control and hormone replacement therapy, has pros and cons, not every woman is at risk for estrogen-related blood clots. Yet for some women, certain variables can place them at higher risk.

Women with the greatest risk are those who have already had a blood clot or pulmonary embolism in the past, or have a genetic factor that increases the risk of blood clots, Dr. Goldberg says. Other risk factors for clots include being a smoker, inactive, or overweight.

So how do you know what products contain estrogen? First, check the label on contraceptives and hormonal therapies. If you spot words like estrogen, estradiol, or conjugated estrogen, the product contains estrogen, says gynecologist **Kathy C. Maupin, MD, in St. Louis, Missouri, founder of BioBalance Health, and author of *The Secret Female Hormone***.

Then keep these product categories on your radar:

**Birth control pills:** Also called oral contraceptives, most types contain a combination of estrogen and progestin, a synthetic form of progesterone, which is another hormone produced by the ovaries.

**Contraceptive skin patch:** Like birth control pills, the patch is designed to prevent pregnancy and usually contains a combination of female hormones, including estrogen.

**NuvaRing:** This small ring is inserted into the vagina once a month for three weeks to prevent pregnancy by delivering a dose of estrogen and progestin.

**Hormone replacement therapy (HRT):** Some women choose this option to seek relief from menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes, vaginal dryness, and pain during intercourse. It usually contains estrogen and progestin and sometimes testosterone.

**Estrogen replacement therapy (ERT):** Postmenopausal women who have undergone a hysterectomy and have no uterus may be candidates for ERT to increase estrogen levels in the body. It can be delivered through oral pills, skin patches, vaginal ring, skin cream, or skin gel.

**Bioidentical hormones:** These compounds can serve as an alternative to other treatments for menopausal symptoms, as they resemble the hormones your body made earlier in life. They usually contain estradiol, progesterone, and testosterone and have numerous delivery options, including oral, transdermal, vaginal, skin creams and gels, and shots, **Dr. Maupin says**.

## Weigh Your Options

Fortunately, if you can't take estrogen-containing products because of blood clot risk, you have several options. For starters, if you're looking for alternatives for birth control, you can always use a condom or the withdrawal method, but if you'd like greater protection, an intrauterine device (IUD) is your best bet, Maupin says. You can also take a progestin-only oral contraceptive, often referred to as the mini-pill. Other non-estrogen options include the birth control shot, implant, diaphragm, cervical cap, and sponge.

Options for menopausal symptoms depend on the particular symptom. For vaginal dryness and painful intercourse, for instance, you might consider a non-estrogen lubricant or a vaginal estrogen cream. Although the latter does contain estrogen, it's in such a low dose and is delivered vaginally so it doesn't pose an increased risk for clots, Maupin says.

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Testosterone is another option, which Maupin recommends for hot flashes and vaginal dryness. Yet because some women will genetically convert testosterone into estrogen, your doctor will have to monitor your blood levels.

Other alternatives include medications, even antidepressants, Goldberg says. Botanical products like those found in teas or herbs may also address symptoms. Proceed with caution, as some may contain ingredients that act like estrogen in the body and may not be entirely safe, according to the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

The good news is that if you do have to avoid estrogen, you have numerous options. Work with your doctor to determine what course of action is best for you and then rest easy, knowing that you're not putting your health in danger.

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