


Meg's menopause



“Dr Heather Currie has given me the confidence to stand up to the critics of HRT and let me make my own choices. It’s my body, my life, and HRT has given me back a quality of life I thought I had lost when I hit the menopause. This is my story.”

My name is Meg and I am 64 years old. I have a wonderfully supportive husband, three fantastic children and four gorgeous grandchildren. I have been on HRT for 16 years and have no intention of coming off - EVER!!

I first learned of the connection between hormones and depression when I was 21 years old. Sadly I had just lost my mum, aged 55, to uterine cancer which had gone undetected until it was too late. My first child, then aged 19 months, was diagnosed profoundly deaf, and I was seven months pregnant with my second child.

Although there was a lot going on in my life at such a young age, I thought I was coping well until I gave birth to my son, after which I suffered a breakdown and was hospitalised for several weeks.

During this awful time it was explained to me that it was not only the circumstances which led to my breakdown, but also that a women's estrogen levels drop when she gives birth, giving rise to postnatal depression. This made me think about the time I tried to take the contraceptive pill. I reacted quite badly but could never pinpoint exactly what the problem was, but I became very low in mood and just generally was not myself at all.

I also reacted very badly to progesterone tablets which were given to me to postpone a period whilst I was on holiday. It turned out to be the worst holiday I have ever experienced, with dreadful moods and depression which disappeared as quick as it had started once I returned home and stopped taking the tablets.

It then dawned on me that these awful feelings of low mood and depression were actually triggered by a change in my hormones. Luckily with lots of help and support I made a full recovery from my breakdown and went on to live a very happy and fulfilled life with not so much of a hint of depression - until I reached the menopause in my late forties.

Family history

I have always been aware that my family has a history of uterine cancer - my grandmother, mother and sister all having suffered with this awful disease. So, at the age of 48 it was a mutual decision between my gynaecologist and myself to have a full hysterectomy. I was more than happy with this and although a little concerned about the link between hormones and depression, it didn't really worry me as I knew I would be able to have HRT, and it had been 27 years since I had suffered with depression. I really was convinced it could never happen again. How wrong I was!

After the hysterectomy I was put on Evorel 100 mcg. estrogen patches, which worked perfectly well. I was happy and felt better than I had in years. However, I blame myself completely for what happened next. Maybe I became overconfident because I felt so great on HRT, but stupidly I decided to have an estrogen implant, simply for convenience, so I didn't have to change the patches twice a week !!

Unfortunately the implant didn't work, or rather it worked too well because my body absorbed all the estrogen within the first two weeks which meant there was no estrogen left in my body whatsoever (I understand this is extremely rare). This in turn led to me spiralling downwards into a severe depression. Luckily I recognised the signs and knew where I was heading and so was immediately put back on a very high dose of estrogen, together with antidepressants. It took over a year to get back to feeling anything like normal again, but the whole experience terrified me to think that hormones could have such a huge impact on my life and wellbeing.

I stayed happily on Evorel 100 mcg. estrogen for about ten years, after which time I was very conscious that I would, at some stage, have to wean myself off. I felt this was not only because of the health concerns which have always been linked to HRT, but also because of the constant reminders from GPs and other healthcare professionals of the 'so called' dangers HRT posed. My own GP was very sympathetic and recognised I had a high sensitivity to changes in my estrogen levels, and so was happy to let me continue for as long as it took to wean myself off.

“I would rather live a happy and fulfilled life on HRT than lead a miserable existence without it.”

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However, when I visited a different GP for something unrelated she told me I had to come off my HRT within two weeks and gave me a prescription for the antidepressant fluoxetine. Needless to say I ignored her advice and instead I began cutting down the patches. I went from 100 mcg. to 75 mcg. without too much of a problem. I stabilised myself on 75 mcg. for about a year and then slowly started cutting this down until I was down to a 50 mcg. patch.

When the problems began

The problems started when I managed to cut down to a 25 mcg. patch. I was not myself and became increasingly low. However, I was determined to go all the way and come off HRT completely, and so I persevered and cut the 25 mcg. patch in half. At this point I was suffering terribly, both mentally and physically. It had taken me



• Meg and her husband Steve love to motorbike!

over four years of cutting the patches to get to this stage, but now I was at a loss to know what to do but I couldn't continue, I was a complete wreck. I didn't know which way to turn and was desperate for help. I thought I was destined for a miserable life and would have to rely on antidepressants as a long-term solution.

It was then that I watched the programme by Kirsty Walk *'The Menopause & Me'* with Dr Heather Currie, and immediately identified with all the symptoms described by people on the programme.

I was permanently miserable, had terrible mood swings and outbursts that became quite aggressive. I was totally irrational. I felt I hated my husband which was crazy because I love him to bits, he just couldn't do anything right. My sex drive was zero and any attempts at intercourse were painful and led to bleeding. I was constantly tired, every joint in my body ached and of course the hot sweats were continuous. I truly felt about 90 years old rather than my early 60s.

So, I listened with interest to what Dr Heather Currie said and researched the new NICE guidelines on HRT and soon came to realise that there was in fact no, or at most, very little risk to my health, in fact the benefits could outway the risks.

NICE advised that GPs should not force women to come off HRT and should let them make their own decisions. However, I was still concerned about certain aspects of long term use, especially considering my age, and felt I needed help with making this decision. So I wrote to Heather Currie using her online email service, explaining my predicament and asking her advice. I was surprised when she emailed me back almost immediately and said that I could continue to take HRT for as long as I wished. She confirmed I was a very low risk as I have no family history of breast cancer, I was on estrogen only, transdermal being the safest route, and she assured me





there are no significant risks with long term estrogen. She advised me to show her email to my GP and that the GP could even contact her directly if she wanted more clarification.

Green light

This was the confirmation I needed, it gave me the 'green light' to do what I desperately wanted to do and continue with my HRT indefinitely. I simply needed someone in authority to give me permission and reassurance.

So, armed with all this new information I went to see my rather wonderful but very overworked GP, to explain that I really don't want to be pressured to come off HRT. I showed her Dr Currie's email and the new NICE guidelines and explained that I felt I was entitled to make the decision to stay on HRT, forever if need be. My GP was extremely interested in talking about the subject because coincidentally, the surgery had just had a meeting about the new NICE guidelines relating to HRT and agreed it was entirely my decision. However, she was armed with a printed document from the NHS titled 'Risks of HRT' and she felt she needed to point out that there were indeed 'risks' which could not be ignored and so proceeded to read me the following:

"NICE says "taking combined HRT is associated with a small risk of breast cancer." My reply was to point out that I was not taking combined HRT, I was on estrogen only!

NICE says "Estrogen only HRT can increase the risk of womb cancer." My reply was to remind her I have had a hysterectomy and so I don't have a womb to become cancerous!

"NICE says "there is only a very small risk of increased ovarian cancer in taking HRT." My reply was to remind her I had a total hysterectomy and so I don't have any ovaries to become cancerous either !

After looking slightly embarrassed she really thought she had got me on the final statement and continued to read:

"NICE clearly says "Taking HRT can increase the risk of blood clots (deep vein thrombosis)." At which point I read to her the small print underneath, which clearly states "This only applies to orally administered HRT, there is no increased risk using transdermal HRT (patches or gel)."



• Meg's grandchildren - Harrison, Hayden, Isobel and Willow are her pride and joy.

At this stage I think I had made my point. My GP shook my hand and congratulated me on my in depth knowledge of the subject. I confidently put myself back on Evorel 50 mcg. patches and feel as if I have got my life back.

Now

I am now 64 years old, and have been on Evorel estrogen patches for a total of 16 years so far. Unless there is more research to the contrary I fully intend to stay on HRT and stay happy for as long as it takes, forever if need be.

I have also been able to help my eldest daughter who is profoundly deaf, now aged 43 and a mother of three. My experience has given her the courage to undergo a much needed hysterectomy and she is also confidently on Evorel 50 mcg. patches.

I can't thank Dr Heather Currie enough for giving me the confidence to stand up for myself and help educate my GP. She truly has given me my life back. I just feel so sad for the women out there who are still suffering by having GPs who are still insisting they have to stop their HRT.

I understand I am in the lowest risk group and maybe there are some risks for others which need to be taken into consideration, but it should be our choice ladies. If I do ever develop breast cancer or any of the other risks that have been associated with HRT in the past, then at least it has been my decision and mine alone. I am prepared to take full responsibility for any consequences of long term HRT because I would rather live a happy and fulfilled life on HRT than lead a miserable existence without it.

