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Hormone replacement use down in Canadian women

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Hormone replacement therapy use by older Canadian women has dropped dramatically since a major study published in 2002 linked HRT use to higher rates of heart attack and stroke, a study has found.

Analysis of data from five provinces shows that use among senior women dropped to five per cent in 2006-2007 from 14 per cent in 2001-2002.

The Canadian Institute for Health Information study, released Thursday, looked only at women 65 and older, and therefore reflects only a small part of the picture of what happened to HRT use in Canada in the wake of the publication of the Women's Health Initiative study.

Hormone replacement therapy is generally prescribed for the symptoms of menopause, which women typically go through in their late 40s and early 50s.

"Up until the late-1990s, many women were prescribed hormone replacement therapy because of its success in relieving the symptoms of menopause and its reported protective benefits in coronary heart disease and osteoporosis," Dr. Jennifer Blake, obstetrician and gynecologist in chief at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto, said in a release.

"New evidence highlighting the potential risks of HRT, as well as its lack of benefit in preventing heart disease, has forced caregivers and patients to re-examine its use, particularly in elderly patients."

Hormone replacement therapy is one of a number of drugs on what's known as the Beers Criteria, a list of medications that are "potentially inappropriate" for use in seniors.

A CIHI study released last fall showed just over a quarter of Canadian seniors were receiving at least one of the Beers listed drugs in 2005-2006, despite the fact that their use in this age group has been red-flagged.

This new report showed that while usage of HRT dropped dramatically — and year after year — in senior women following the publication of the Women's Health Initiative findings, about one in 20 women 65 and older was still taking the drug in 2006-2007. Before the study was published, about one in eight Canadian women in this age group was taking HRT.

After the Women's Health Initiative findings were made public, the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada recommended that if women need HRT for management of menopausal symptoms they should take the drugs at the lowest effective dose for the shortest time possible.

The CIHI analysis did find a trend towards women in this age group moving to a lower dose formulation of HRT. For instance, 37 per cent of women who were taking higher dose HRT in 2001-2002 and still taking HRT in 2006-2007 had switched to a lower dose regimen.

The five provinces included in the CIHI analysis were Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.

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