Progestagen-only treatment before menopause: increased risk of breast cancer

A French cohort study. A French study based on data from the E3N cohort included about 100 000 women aged 40 to 64 years, who were covered by complementary health insurance (the Mutuelle générale de l'éducation nationale [MGEN]) (3,4).

Since 1990, these women have been questioned every two years about their lifetime use of hormone therapy. More than 70 000 women responded to the questionnaire.

Progestagens taken alone before menopause lead to an increase in breast cancer. 28 370 women had used progestagen-only products; low-dose progestagens were not analysed in this study.

An increase in the risk of breast cancer was observed in women taking oral progestagen without oestrogen for more than 4.5 years before menopause. These women had an approximately 1.5 times higher risk of developing breast cancer than women who did not take progestagen. After progestagen discontinuation, the risk of breast cancer again fell to levels similar to those of non-users.

There is widespread use of progestagen-only products before menopause in spite of the lack of robust evidence concerning their risk-benefit balance, particularly with long-term treatment. It is advisable to evaluate drugs before their use provokes adverse reactions in patients.

In France, various oral progestagens have long been used for various benign menopause-related disorders, in spite of the lack of robust clinical trial evidence on the risk-benefit balance of long-term treatment (1,2,3).

However, the WHI trial and other studies showed that hormone replacement therapy with the oestrogen/progestagen combination for menopause leads to an increased risk of breast cancer (1,2). Progestagens play an important role, but the progestagens examined in these studies of menopausal women are not the ones most commonly prescribed in France.

Although low-dose progestagens were excluded from the analysis, French epidemiological data published in 2007 provide interesting insights.