By Paula Moyer

Helen M. Torok, M.D.

National report — The use of bioidentical hormone replacement therapy (BHRT) in dermatology is preferable to using synthetic hormones because potential overdose is less hazardous, and bioidentical hormones are not known to be carcinogenic, says Julie T. Hunter, M.D., founder and director of Wholistic Dermatology in Beverly Hills, Calif.

Acknowledging that mimicking nature’s dosing is "always the goal," Dr. Hunter says BHRT "slows down the clock, because hormone supplementation helps you, your brain, skin, energy, and many organs function younger and longer." Cosmetic procedures and surgery don't provide the same results without the use of topical hormones to rejuvenate the skin, she says.

As with any therapy, dermatologists need to counsel the patient regarding reasonable expectations of treatment with bioidentical hormones. "People need to understand that life leads to death. You're going to age." However, she says, "you can slow it down" with BHRT.

Although overdose is possible with bioidentical hormones, Dr. Hunter says that it is less hazardous than with synthetic hormones.

The treating physician needs to know all of the medications a patient is taking to avoid hormone-hormone interaction, Dr. Hunter says. For example, a patient on thyroid supplementation can experience thyroid suppression when taking supplemental estrogen. Excessive estrogen can cause breast tenderness and weight gain, because estrogen promotes the storage of fat. Excessive dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA) and testosterone are linked to acne, oily skin, irritability and aggression.

The symptoms of hormone overdose with bioidentical hormones are obvious, Dr. Hunter says, so the dose can be easily adjusted if such symptoms occur.

Topical tips

According to Dr. Hunter, orally delivered estrogen may increase the risk of breast cancer. Thus, dermatologists should only prescribe estrogen in nontoxic, topical cream formulations.

Similarly, supplemental testosterone is given topically as an individualized dosing in a compounded, nontoxic cream. Preparations can be prepared with DHEA and progesterone.

Although thyroid supplementation and DHEA can both be taken as oral agents, topical DHEA in a cream formulation is preferable in patients susceptible to acne, Dr. Hunter says. Wherever they are placed, topical creams should absorb quickly and completely.

Even if the hormone supplement is bioidentical, the wrong vehicle cream can undermine the hormone, Dr. Hunter says. When arranging for the pharmacy to compound the hormone and the vehicle, "Always ask for the complete ingredient list of the cream," she says, adding that vehicle creams can contain "hormone-disrupting, inflammatory ingredients."

Caution required
Dermatologists need to be cautious with any new trend, including bioidentical hormones, says Helen M. Torok, M.D., medical director, Trillium Creek Dermatology, Medina, Ohio.

Dr. Torok says she is not seeing BHRT being used for conventional dermatologic conditions but more for problems such as low libido and hot flashes. However, she says, "I have seen dermatologic problems due to the BHRT," including acne, hirsutism and androgenic alopecia.

According to Dr. Torok, the main agents compounded into BHRT are estriol, estradiol, testosterone, progesterone and DHEA. She says she is surprised to see therapies that include all of these hormones compounded together without regard to sensitivities the patient may have or to hormone-hormone interactions. Products often lack package inserts to warn of complications, she explains.

"Patients assume that because (BHRT) is touted as a natural, plant-derived product, that it is safe, has no side effects and works," Dr. Torok says. Doctors should counsel patients about the potential for systemic absorption of topically applied hormones, she says.

"So many patients are shocked to learn that a topical drug has systemic side effects," she adds. "Their perception and understanding is that a topical has no adverse effects." Adverse events can include acne, androgenic alopecia, melasma, hirsutism, breast cancer, stroke, cardiovascular events and psychological problems.

**Disclosures:** Dr. Torok reports no relevant financial interests. Dr. Hunter is the formulator/owner of Wholistic Dermatology, which manufactures Skin Therapy by Julia T. Hunter M.D. Skin Care Products, Skin Fitness Plus Synergistic Supplements, and Skin Physiology Healthy Pharmaceuticals and Bio-identical Hormones.

Helen M. Torok, M.D.