

SIDEBAR

Male hormone replacement therapy

Obesity, brittle bones, muscle loss, impotence and even depression are all possible symptoms of decreased testosterone levels in males due to aging.

Sometimes called 'male menopause,' physicians prefer 'andropause' because the former has connotations of drastic changes in hormonal levels, while the latter refers to a more gradual decline.

Some experts call andropause a silent epidemic, believing as many as five million American men suffer from this disorder with 95 percent of them undiagnosed.

"Most physicians don't pay much attention to it," says John Mulcahy, MD, professor of urology. "That's probably because it's no particular detriment to one's health."

Treatment is testosterone therapy, the application of which has come a long way from the poorly-absorbed and liver-damaging pills of the 1960s. Currently, one of the most popular and least expensive applications is a shot of *Depo Testosterone*

every two weeks. Less invasive and steadier dosing is the *Androderm*[®] patch, although it has the unfortunate tendency to create an irritating rash in two-thirds of patients who use it.

One of the newest testosterone replacement therapies is *AndroGel*[®], a colorless gel that is rubbed on an area of the body once a day. Convenient and safe, the downside is its high expense.

Dr Mulcahy says yet another option, *Striant*[®], has made its way onto the market. "It's an entirely new preparation via two little patches you attach to your gums inside the upper lip," he says. "*Striant*[®] claims to deliver better absorption, but because it's so new we haven't had a lot of patients to observe yet."

Critics of male hormone replacement therapy (HRT) say it causes testicular shrinkage, triggers polycythemia which can lead to congestive heart failure, and accelerates the growth of prostate cancer.

"If extra testosterone is used in men who don't have a problem, like bodybuild-

ers who use supernormal amounts, it *does* create high hormone levels and will shrink the testes, but otherwise it does not cause shrinkage," says Mulcahy. "And polycythemia occurs only rarely, but we can watch for that and cut the levels if necessary."

As for its connection to cancer, Dr. Mulcahy says HRT is not administered to men with prostate cancer. "Although the connection's never been proved, the inference is by giving male hormones you stimulate the growth of prostate cancer," he says. "But men can get prostate cancer even if they have low testosterone."

"If a man suffers from low libido or lethargy, then testosterone replacement may possibly alleviate these symptoms," says Dr. Mulcahy. "If that's the case, there's no reason to suffer these effects unnecessarily." ■

To reach John Mulcahy, MD, professor of urology, contact IMACS at 1-800-622-4989.