

Hormone Replacement Therapy: It may be Just What the Doctor Ordered

BY BEN HILLIKER, M.D.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, roughly half of the population in the U.S. is now over the age of 40. Statistics tell us that, due to the aging of the Baby Boomer generation (those born between 1946 and 1964) combined with the increase in life expectancy, the number of people who have celebrated their 40th birthday has been steadily increasing.

Despite advances in modern medicine—coupled with anti-aging technologies—this aging population is subject to the inevitable declines in cognitive, physical and sexual function. For many, these changes can be manifested as chronic fatigue, weight gain, sleep disturbance, brain fog, mood swings and decreased libido.

Despite our attempts to control as many of life's inputs as possible—i.e. ensuring that one gets adequate amounts of sleep, eats a nutrient-rich diet, maintains good oral hydration, takes the appropriate supplements, or works out several times a week—we all succumb to the inevitable age-based decline.

One of the largest contributing factors in this, for both men and women, is a drop in hormone levels. For men, starting at the age of 30,

testosterone levels start to decline at an annual rate of one to three percent. For women in the U.S., the average age for the onset of menopause is 52.5 years. During this time of transition, estrogen levels can plummet by as much as 80-90 percent. What makes it particularly troublesome is that women lose the majority of their estrogen over the course of a few years as they go through this life-changing transition. The exact annual rate of decline is not linear, but most of the significant reduction occurs within a few years after menopause begins.

On average, men's testosterone levels, once they reach age of 50, are at roughly half of the peak levels of their late teens and early twenties. While women's levels decline to half of their peak at a later age—they nonetheless decline more precipitously during menopause. Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) emerged in the 1960s



as a medical treatment used to supplement or replace hormones that the body could no longer produce in sufficient quantities.

One of the most widely used forms of HRT, Premarin, was made from the urine of pregnant mares. (The name is a derivative of *pre*—from pregnant—and *marin*—from mares.) Premarin became the most commonly prescribed form of estrogen replacement therapy for menopausal women throughout much of the 20th century.

HRT gained widespread popularity until the 1990s, when the National Institute of Health—through the



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Women's Health Initiative (WHI)—initiated its landmark clinical study which raised a number of red flags about potential risks associated with long-term use.

Early studies (such as the WHI) that linked HRT to an increased risk of cancer, heart attack, and stroke had several methodological flaws and limitations, which have since been re-evaluated. Some key issues with the early studies included the age and health of study participants, the use of synthetic or animal-derived hormones (as opposed to bioidentical hormones); the length of follow-up, and the lack of individualized therapies. More recent analysis of the WHI data and other studies have shown that for many women, the benefits (such as relief from menopausal symptoms and protection against bone loss) may

outweigh the risks. In men, earlier studies that showed a possible link between cardiovascular risks (i.e. heart attack and stroke) and testosterone therapy have been largely discredited, with most recent studies demonstrating a strong beneficial relationship between normal testosterone levels and cardiovascular health.

Updated research provides a more nuanced view that highlights the importance of personalized treatment.

Currently, an estimated six million people in the U.S. are on some form of HRT. For many, the treatment has proven to be the fountain of youth—leading to longer, more vibrant lives. Multiple preparations of HRT exist, and consultation with a trusted physician or medical professional is essential to ensure maximal benefits are derived.

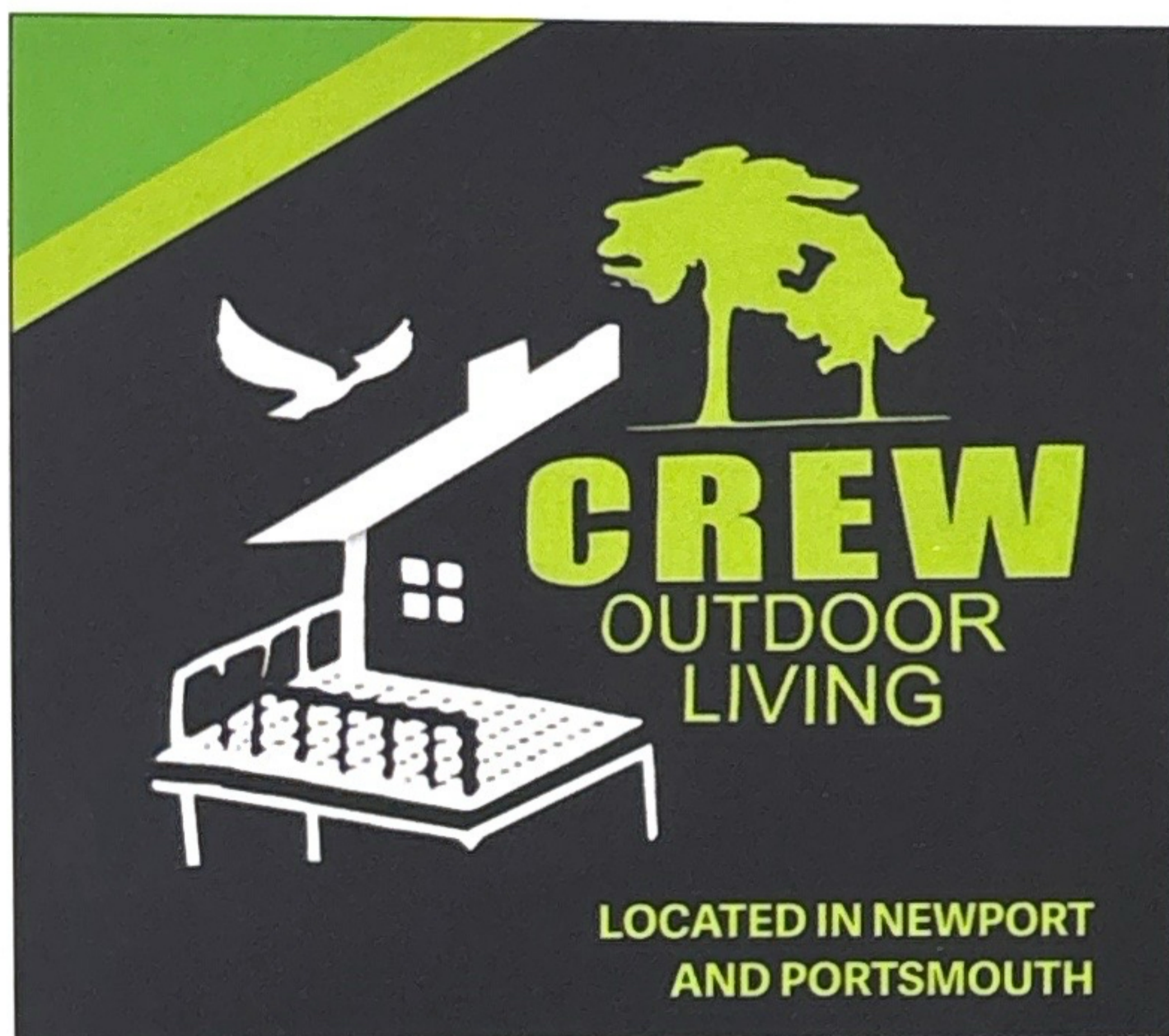


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