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Study backs drug-cancer link

Oregon - Breast cancer rates fell as more women quit using hormones to relieve symptoms of menopause

Wednesday, July 25, 2007

KATY MULDOON
The Oregonian Staff

Breast cancer rates among Northwest women have plummeted since 2002, when thousands abruptly quit taking hormone-replacement medicines, a large new study shows.

The analysis, conducted at Kaiser Permanente's Center for Health Research in Portland, confirms what another major study released this spring suggested: Breast cancer rates and hormone use have traveled in tandem. Rates rose during the years when hormone therapy was commonly prescribed to alleviate menopause symptoms; they fell swiftly after 2002, when news that hormones held more risks than benefits prompted many women to dump the drugs.

As did a study published this spring in the New England Journal of Medicine, the new findings from Oregon suggest that hormone use played a key role in the disease rate's rise and fall, said Dr. Andrew Glass, the study's lead author. The new evidence, he said, should help women make decisions when it comes to alleviating or coping with hot flashes, sleeplessness and other sometimes debilitating symptoms of menopause.

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"You can't do anything about your genetic background or your family history," Glass said in an interview last week. "But you can do something about the medicine you put in your mouth."

The study was published Tuesday afternoon at <http://jnci.oxfordjournals.org> and will be in Aug. 1 print editions of the Journal of the National Cancer Institute.

Among its key findings:

Breast cancer rates climbed 26 percent from the early 1980s to the early 1990s, then rose an additional 15 percent through 2001. From 2003 to 2006, the rate dropped 18 percent.

The rise in breast cancer rates through the 1980s paralleled rises in mammography screening and hormone therapy, particularly use of estrogen plus progesterone.

The 15 percent rise in breast cancer rates from 1992 to 2002 mirrored the rise in hormone therapy; mammography screening, meanwhile, remained at 1991 levels.

The steep decline in breast cancer rates that began in 2003 paralleled a 75 percent drop in hormone-therapy use, while mammography rates stayed the same.

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