

AWARENESS & SKEPTICISM KEY TO DRUG SAFETY FOR WOMEN

Over the years, several breakthroughs in science and medicine have helped women manage gender-specific health concerns. Some of these concerns include menstrual discomfort and menopause, contraception, beauty and diet, and anxiety and depression. There is also a long list of drugs and medical devices that either haven't delivered as promised or, much worse, have injured and killed women ... some that are still being used to this day. (Look up a telling report online by the American Association for Justice titled *Unequal Harm*.)

When women and their families demand justice in a court of law, they often learn that major pharmaceutical companies knowingly put profit ahead of safety. Meanwhile, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) doesn't have the resources or the means to remove harmful drugs from the marketplace.

Case in Point: Hormone Replacement Therapy

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) became big business in 1942 with the introduction of Premarin, an estrogen supplement made from pregnant mares that was supposed to help women suffering the negative effects of menopause. By 1975, estrogen therapy was linked to cancer of the uterus, and, in 1989, breast cancer. Still, Wyeth introduced a combination of estrogen and progestin in 1996 called Prempro. Wyeth's profits soared to \$2 billion in 2001.

The tide started to turn in 2002 when a huge federal study on hormone therapy was stopped after researchers linked the drugs to an increased risk of invasive breast cancer, heart disease and stroke. HRT sales dropped dramatically, but today are enjoying a global resurgence pushed by the pharmaceutical industry. Meanwhile, Pfizer, now the owner of Wyeth, announced that it will pay up to \$1.2 billion to settle 10,000 Prempro patient lawsuits.

There are simply too many problem drugs and medical devices to name. So, how can a smart patient avoid dangerous medical products?

1. **Be skeptical:** There's risk in taking any prescription drug, especially long-term. But we often put too much faith in science and see every drug as a silver bullet. When fully considered, the potential benefits may not be worth the risk.
2. **Be more skeptical of new drugs:** We know a lot about the various side effects caused by drugs that have been on the market for years and have been used by millions of people. New drugs and medical devices may have only been tested in limited clinical trials sponsored by the company manufacturing the drug. Women have traditionally been under-represented in these tests.

3. **Be REALLY skeptical of any drug that is heavily advertised:** Drug companies are spending billions on advertising to both doctors and the public – advertising that is often cited as manipulative or misleading, especially ads targeting women.
4. **Find trusted sources of information:** The key is to make sure that the underlying data is not sponsored by pharmaceutical companies or related organizations. And that includes doctors. Don't hesitate to compare what they're telling you with information you find online or through other trusted sources.

Nothing in this article should be construed as legal advice. You must consult with an attorney for the application of the law to your specific circumstances.

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