



FIRST PERSON: MY BHT EXPERIENCE

JENNIFER SHELBY, 44, a fashion buyer, started taking BHT nine months ago on the advice of her cosmetic dermatologist. The treatment had an effect within days, and she now plans to stay on BHT indefinitely

In my thirties, I used to take my looks for granted. I'm tall and slim-built and people have always told me that I look about 10 years younger than my actual age. But in my forties, I have had to work harder at my appearance. I have Botox injections twice a year and minor laser work for liver spots; I do Reformer Pilates three times a week and stick to a low-fat diet. Even so, over the past few years, I began to feel that my body was letting me down. My sleeping pattern was disturbed and I felt moody and lacking in energy, and I wasn't feeling sexy any more.

'My Botox doctor told me about bioidentical hormone therapy, and it seemed like the logical next step for me. Apparently, lots of celebrities and women in the public eye are taking it to maintain that "ageless" look. She referred me to a clinic in Harley Street, where I had a series of blood tests. They showed that my hormone levels were at the low end of optimum, and I was prescribed a customised combination of oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone. I am a bit of a control freak and wanted to know exactly what I was taking. These hormones are really powerful, and you need to take them with care and under supervision.

'Just how powerful was soon clear. Within 72 hours of taking sublingual oestrogen, I was off the hormonal emotional rollercoaster and feeling back to my old self. I slept through the night, and the testosterone gave me my sex drive back. Nine months on, my hair is thicker than it was in my twenties, although I haven't noticed a great deal of difference with my skin. What I am expecting is that BHT will help to keep my skin looking the way it does now so there won't be any change in five years' time.

'For me, taking BHT is not just about vanity, it is for my sense of wellbeing – but the two do go together. It's just as important for me to feel limber, flexible, youthful and vibrant as it is to have pinchable cheeks with dense collagen fed by oestrogen. It costs me around £2,000 a year, but that's only the loss of a holiday or a Chanel handbag – I'd give them both up in a heartbeat.'

derived from natural plant sources – often yams and soya – but so are many types of HRT. Plus, it's a 'new' kid on the block compared to other hormone treatments, including HRT, which has been around for over 50 years, and the contraceptive pill, which was launched in the UK in 1961.

The ideal time to start BHT is staggeringly young, and long before any age-related changes take place. 'I see women in their late twenties and early thirties,' says LA-based Dr Rashel Tahzib, a family-practice physician who specialises in anti-ageing. 'People in LA are very image-conscious and want to emulate the Hollywood crowd, but they're also concerned with feeling good. They would rather avoid chronic disease by preventing ageing on a cellular level.'

In Europe, the biggest market for BHT is Germany – not surprising, given the nation's interest in alternative medicine. Parisians are also big fans. London has a growing number of anti-ageing practitioners, including Dr Cecilia Tregear, who was among the pioneers of the treatment of hormone imbalances using BHT 12 years ago. She insists that BHT is a bona fide therapy, pointing out that although it

comes under the banner of complementary therapy, it still has a hormonal effect on the body: 'These are proper hormones that need to be taken under the supervision of a doctor,' she says. 'Patients need to be monitored throughout the treatment.'

They also need to be well-heeled: treatment can cost £2,000–£4,000 a year – some

hormones cost up to £400 each; then there are quarterly blood tests to reassess hormone levels. And it's for the long term: the prevention of ageing is a full-time com-

mitment, and BHT only works for as long as you take it. What's more, not everyone is suitable: Dr Tregear will exclude women who have a family history of breast cancer or deep-vein thrombosis. (At present, the prevailing view seems to be that BHT could prove to have the same long-term health issues as HRT; natural or otherwise, a hormone is still a hormone.)

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But, putting aside the more superficial motivation of wanting to look younger for longer, BHT could be the key to a healthier future – an increasingly important goal when the post-baby boomers will be expected to work longer without flagging. 'We need to change the predetermined self-acceptance that being "old" is about aching joints, heart disease, strokes, osteoporosis and cancers,' says Dr Tregear, who sees BHT as the ultimate preventative. 'All these can be prevented or treated if the early signs of ageing are detected in time.'

Her confidence is catching; if she is right, we may look forward to a future when legions of women have their hormone levels checked as casually as they visit their dentist. But then again, BHT could ultimately prove to be just another expensive and fruitless quest for the 'elixir of youth'. 'The truth is that no one yet knows, and there are no long-term clinical trials to prove it one way or the other,' says Mike Bowen, a consultant gynaecologist who regularly prescribes HRT. 'Ultimately, only time will tell.' □