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CHECKUPS; Words of Caution About a Hot Potato

By KATHLEEN McAULIFFE

AT health food stores, tiny tubs of wild yam cream sell well, despite their price (\$20 or more). The lure is wild yam's reputation as a source of natural progesterone, a hormone that proponents of alternative medicine consider a palliative for menopausal discomforts.

Natural progesterone creams have also become a hot commodity. In recent years, sales of wild yam salves, pure progesterone creams and hybrids containing both have accounted for a large chunk of the mushrooming \$600-million market in natural remedies for menopause.

Many women believe these products replenish their dwindling progesterone. Satisfied users say they have fewer hot flashes and more supple skin, and that they are also protecting themselves from osteoporosis and uterine cancer.

Natural progesterone is widely perceived as safer than progestin, its synthetic cousin and a common ingredient in hormone replacement therapy. This conviction was bolstered by the debut last December of the first prescription natural progesterone for menopausal women.

But do these products live up to the glowing testimony? And is the new oral prescription drug superior?

Yam balms cannot supply the body with natural progesterone, said Gail Mahady, an authority on plant medicine at the University of Illinois in Chicago. "Only a pharmaceutical laboratory can convert the compounds in yams into progesterone," Professor Mahady explained.

Natural progesterone creams are not always what they seem to be, either. Aeron Life Cycles, a diagnostic testing company in San Leandro, Calif., screened 27 products and found that 15 of them contained no or little progesterone. The rest contained dosages that might be useful, but only if they were adequately absorbed -- a big "if" for many doctors.

In fact, a report published last year in *The Lancet*, the British medical journal, concluded that Progest, a relatively high-dose cream that is a top seller in the United States, does not raise blood progesterone levels sufficiently to protect the uterus from the cancer-inducing effects of taking estrogen alone; currently, that is the only use for which progesterone has been clinically approved. Many doctors find this result disturbing, because some women are substituting creams like Progest for the progestin normally prescribed in hormone replacement therapy.

There is also little or no evidence to support the use of progesterone cream by itself to fortify bones or douse hot flashes, menopause experts said.

By contrast, the new prescription progesterone, a capsule sold under the brand name Prometrium, may offer genuine benefits to users of hormone replacement. While comparable to progestin in preventing estrogen's cancerous effects on the uterus, Prometrium is believed to offer better protection against heart disease. In clinical trials, it was better than progestin at preserving estrogen's positive effect on cholesterol levels.

Some women may also tolerate Prometrium better than Provera and other synthetic progesterones. But even though Prometrium is identical to the body's own hormone, it causes dizziness, headaches, sore breasts and other adverse reactions in 9 percent to 16 percent of women.

The drug is not cheap, either. A bottle of 100 capsules (roughly a seven-week supply) sells for \$54, though most insurers will cover some or all of the cost.

