

Company Sends Letter to Retain Hormone Sales

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Moving quickly to try to prevent women from stopping their hormone replacement treatments because of fear of breast cancer, the Wyeth company has sent 500,000 letters to doctors and other health care providers urging them to consider when they talk to patients the "critical role" that one of its products, Prempro, has in relieving the symptoms of menopause.

A spokesman for Wyeth, Douglas Petkus, said the company began sending the letters on Tuesday, soon after researchers announced that they had halted a large study of the long-term use of Prempro.

The researchers stopped the study of the drug, a combination of estrogen and progestin that six million women take, after finding that it caused small increases in breast cancer, heart attacks, strokes and blood clots.

The letter provides a glimpse at how Wyeth hopes to hold onto sales of Prempro and its related hormone therapy drug, Premarin, which generated more than \$2 billion in sales for the company last year.

The letter tries to differentiate between women who take Prempro for more than four years, the point where researchers found a higher risk of breast cancer, and those who took it for less time. The letter urges doctors to consider Prempro's benefits of relieving hot flashes and other problems in healthy women who begin the therapy early in menopause.

Wyeth appears to be trying to keep any loss of sales limited to women who take Prempro for four years or longer. To reduce fears, Wyeth also points out that the risks of breast cancer and heart problems had already been found in other studies and included in Prempro's labeling.