

DES VOICE

Voice
Fall 2006
issue 110

DES Daughters May Experience Slightly Earlier Menopause

"Age at Natural Menopause in Women Exposed to Diethylstilbestrol in Utero," Elizabeth E. Hatch, et al, American Journal of Epidemiology, 1 October 2006; 164: 682-688.

Reviewed by Kari Christianson

It may not seem all that important to individual DES Daughters, but in the world of research the finding is significant. "The average age at menopause was 52.2 years in unexposed women and 51.5 years in DES-exposed women."

While the span in age may seem minimal at first glance, it reflects a statistical difference apparently caused by DES exposure alone. Ac-

cording to researcher Elizabeth Hatch, other known reasons for early menopause, such as smoking, birth control and HIRT use, pregnancy history, and age of mother's menopause were reviewed without changing the overall results.

Data was collected from questionnaires filled out by participants in the National Cancer Institute (NCI) long-running DES Follow-up Study. Hatch is at the Boston University School of Public Health and is a Principal Investigator with the NCI DES Follow-up Study.

It shows that DES Daughters are 50% more likely to experience natural menopause at any

continued on page 3

Earlier Menopause from page 1
given age. For example, that means if there are two unexposed women who reach menopause at age 43, you can expect there would be three DES Daughters of the same age also to experience natural menopause. It holds true in the study that at all ages, a greater number of DES Daughters achieved menopause, compared with unexposed women, up through age 54.

The researchers found an increased risk of earlier natural menopause among those who were exposed to the highest cumulative doses of DES in utero. Hatch speculates this might be related to the number of ovarian follicles produced before birth.

She points out that laboratory studies suggest DES-exposed animals start off with a smaller follicle pool, which decreases more rapidly over time than in unexposed animals. Some studies seem to indicate menopause is reached when the number of ovarian follicles falls to 1,100. If a DES Daughter starts out with fewer follicles she'd be expected to reach the set number earlier than a woman with more follicles to begin with, therefore going into menopause sooner.

But Hatch is quick to point out that

while this study shows DES Daughters seem to be at risk for earlier menopause, the cause has not been definitely established yet. However, the results do confirm anecdotal evidence collected by DES Action, through the years, from DES Daughters.

This is the first report of prenatal exposure to DES affecting the age of

The researchers found an increased risk of earlier natural menopause among those who were exposed to the highest cumulative doses of DES in utero.

natural menopause, and therefore, suggesting an influence on the reproductive lifespan of DES Daughters.

Since more than half of the study participants were still premenopausal when they were questioned in 2001, Hatch recommends the age at natural menopause question be reevaluated when additional information is available. A new questionnaire was mailed to NCI DES Follow-up Study participants earlier this year, so there will be new data to analyze soon.

DES VOICE