



wellness lab

These new treatments for common yet perplexing problems have the potential to be life-changing, research shows. Learn what they can do for you.

by Tula Karras

Over the past year, while the headlines were all about COVID-19, some scientists were working diligently to find new ways to treat and address some top women's health issues. Their discoveries will help millions of patients, but they also show that female-focused wellness is finally getting the attention it deserves. "These advances are evidence that we're putting money and time into women's health, which is a much-needed and long-awaited change," says Veronica Gillispie-Bell, M.D., an ob-gyn in New Orleans. Here are the facts you need to know.

EXCITING ADVANCES *in* WOMEN'S HEALTH

1

Fibroid fix

Fibroids, which affect over 80 percent of Black women and about 70 percent of white women by age 50, can cause heavy menstrual bleeding in half of sufferers. Myomectomy (fibroid removal) and hysterectomy are the most common treatments, in part because women aren't always told about nonsurgical alternatives (Black women are often given hysterectomy as their only option). But fibroids can grow back in up to 25 percent of women who have a myomectomy, and hysterectomy ends fertility.

Fortunately, a new treatment helps women delay or even avoid surgery. Oriahnn is the first FDA-approved oral medication for heavy bleeding from fibroids. In studies, about 70 percent of patients had at least a 50 percent reduction in bleeding volume over six months. Oriahnn lowers the hormone regulator GnRH, which in turn reduces the natural production of estrogen, leading to less heavy menstrual bleeding due to uterine fibroids.

"This is a great option for women who want to have children but don't want a myomectomy," says Dr. Gillispie-Bell, the director of the Minimally Invasive Center for the Treatment of Uterine Fibroids. Adds Linda Bradley, M.D., an ob-gyn at Cleveland Clinic and a coauthor of the Oriahnn studies, "For women nearing menopause, it can help them avoid a hysterectomy." (Women with a risk of blood clots or who have had a heart attack or a stroke may not be good candidates.

2

Brand-new birth control

Finally, there's a contraceptive that's hormone-free: Phexxi, approved in May, is a prescription gel that contains natural acids that maintain the vagina's normal pH level, making it inhospitable for sperm. "Inserted into the vagina up to an hour before sex, Phexxi has an efficacy rate of 86 percent, and 93 percent with perfect use," says Lisa Rarick, M.D., an ob-gyn who is on the board at Evofem Biosciences, the female-led company that makes the product. Phexxi is much less likely than spermicides to irritate genital tissue (which can increase the risk of some sexually transmitted infections). And it gives you all the control, unlike condoms, which may require some negotiating. Using the company's telehealth system, you can get a package of 12 applicators mailed to you—no office visit or blood work needed. "It's a great choice for women who have sex a few times a month and don't want to have an IUD in their body or hormones in their blood stream," Dr. Rarick says.

(Phexxi isn't quite as effective as the pill or an IUD, and it isn't recommended for those who have frequent urinary tract infections or yeast infections. Check with your doctor before using it.)

3

Fast-acting migraine relief

If you're one of the 40 million migraine sufferers in the U.S.—85 percent of whom are women—you may be searching for a treatment that fully relieves symptoms without side effects. Enter Nurtec ODT, which works by directly blocking CGRP, a chemical neuropeptide that's at the root of a migraine attack. The drug provides rapid action and also prevents migraines if used every other day. This is notable because "only one of three people who take triptans, the standard migraine treatment, remain pain-free for more than several hours—and for some people, a triptan is useless," says Peter Goadsby, M.D., Ph.D., a neurologist at UCLA and one of the world's leading migraine researchers. Plus, side effects like chest tightness and dizziness are not uncommon. With Nurtec ODT, some sufferers can resume activities within an hour or two of taking it, and there are very few side effects (nausea is the most common one). Bonus: If you have an event coming up that might bring on a migraine (like your period) or something you can't be sidelined for (like a vacation), you can use the drug to head off an attack. "We've never had anything like this in the migraine world, where you can use the same drug to treat and prevent migraines," Dr. Goadsby says. "It will make a big difference for migraine patients who have lost hope that anything will help them." ■



In addition to her work mentioned in this story, Veronica Gillispie-Bell, M.D., is the medical director of the Louisiana Perinatal Quality Collaborative and Pregnancy Associated Mortality Review. She testified before Congress this year about the high maternity mortality rate of Black women, offering real-world solutions. "When I see Black women disproportionately suffering from health disparities, I know that could be my family or me, just because of the color of our skin," she says. "I have the power to change that narrative."