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# Pellets get under your skin

## Not all doctors recommend controversial hormone therapy

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To Beth Pettus, they are the pellets that fell from heaven. Two tiny cylinders implanted under her skin, one made of estrogen and the other testosterone, regulate her sleep, give her energy and, perhaps most enjoyable, increase her libido.

"The benefits are wonderful," said the 37-year-old mother of two from Lexington. "Good, sound sleep. I'm waking up before the alarm clock goes off, and I have so much energy."

The pellets, aka compounded bioidentical hormones, offer an alternative in hormone replacement therapy to pills, patches and creams.

Doctors commonly treat menopausal symptoms with the pellets, but also use them for post-partum depression, shrinking sex drives and menstrual migraine.

The pellets caused some controversy in the medical community, because they are not approved by the FDA.

Because of demand from women such as Pettus, the pellets - manufactured and used for decades in Europe and in other states - are catching on in the Tennessee Valley.

And the demand is high, even competitive.

Michelle Credille, a 40-year-old mother of a newborn, has had her pellets for only a few weeks, but has already booked her next appointment in December.



Daniel Giles/TimesDaily

Dr. Doug Woodford shows a 75 mg testosterone pellet that is injected under the skin for hormone treatments.

Susan Bentley, a nurse practitioner in Sheffield, calls pellets a "very popular topic" at her office. She receives multiple calls daily from patients inquiring about them.

"There is very little brand new in the world of (gynecology) today, so while this is not actually new, it is new to our area," she said. Before their availability in the Shoals, her patients bought pellets in Birmingham and Atlanta and brought them to her office for insertion.

Women are not the only ones benefitting from hormone pellets

"Pellets are being done last door on the right," a sign reads on the door of Dr. Douglas Woodford's office. Woodford, an ob-gyn in Florence, opened an office down the hall from his practice at Collins Medical Office Building so he could treat men for hormone imbalances, too.

"It was not my original intention to treat men, but we had many women bringing in their husbands to get treated because they felt so much better and had so much more energy and he didn't and she wanted him to enjoy life as much as she was," Woodford said.

According to the book "Testosterone for Life," released this year by Harvard Medical School doctor, Abraham Morgentaler, low levels of testosterone in men can lead to fatigue, depression and erectile dysfunction.

Despite their hype, the pellets have critics.

Dr. Larry Stutts, an ob-gyn in Sheffield, does not recommend them to his patients.

"I think it is wise to wait until more data is collected," he said. "I am not closed minded about it, but there are too many alternative ways of administering hormone replacement to be a part of a fad."

In 2005, the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology's stance on pellets advised consumers to be cautious of a form of medicine that has not undergone clinical tests for purity, quality and effectivity.

Compounding pharmacies, which produce medicines, FDA-approved or not, based on doctor's orders make the pellets. Solutions Pharmacy in Chattanooga produces pellets for Woodford, but declined to comment on its demand in the area.

Because of the pellets long history, there is little money in patenting them, and it takes significant funds to get FDA approval. The approval process can take years. There also is little money to be made on the pellets. Though many insurance policies won't cover them, after the first initial doses, the average price usually falls to less than \$50, Woodford said.

A patient's response to a pellet concerns Stutts.

"If you have a reaction to the patch, you just pull the patch off," he said. "The pellets are there until they wear off."

Woodford compares the pellets to using prostaglandin to induce labor, another practice not approved by the FDA.

"I don't think most patients care about the FDA approval because when you look at it, there are so many other things that are that way," he said.

"The important thing is, these are naturally occurring hormones. This is nothing new. It's just the way of administering them that is different."

Their lack of approval doesn't bother Credille. She heard about the pellets on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." Because the pellets aren't advertised in commercials, knowledge is grassroots, spreading mainly by word-of-mouth and through the media.

"I cannot tell you how many people that know that I have had it done through Facebook or at church," Pettus said.

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