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1 **Venous thrombotic Risk in Transgender Women Undergoing Estrogen Therapy: A Systematic Review**
2 **and Meta-Analysis**

3

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21 Transgender, Transsexual, Trans women, Male to female, Cross-sex hormone therapy,
22 Hormones, Estrogen, Thrombosis, Thromboembolism, Embolism

23

24 **ABSTRACT (250 Words)**

25 Background

26 Transgender women are individuals who were assigned as male at birth based on their biological sex,
27 but who identify as female. Supporting a transgender person's gender identity can improve their
28 psychological health, preventing gender dysphoria and its associated morbidities. One important
29 component of medical care is estrogen administration for feminization. Previous reviews have reported
30 conflicting literature on the thrombotic risk of estrogen therapy in transgender women and have
31 highlighted the need for more high quality research.

32 Content

33 To help address the gap in understanding of thrombotic risk in transgender women on estrogen therapy,
34 we performed a systematic review and meta-analysis of the literature. Two evaluators independently
35 assessed study quality using the Ottawa Scale for Cohort Studies. The Poisson-normal model was used
36 to estimate the study-specific incidence rates and the pooled incidence rate. Heterogeneity was
37 measured using Higgins I^2 statistic. The overall estimate of the incidence rate was 0.0023 (95% CI:0.0008
38 – 0.0069). The heterogeneity was significant ($I^2 = 74%$, $p = 0.0039$).

39 Summary

40 Our data suggest that the overall risk of thrombotic events in transgender women taking estrogen
41 therapy is slightly higher than in the general population and comparable to the risk of thrombotic events
42 associated with oral contraceptives in premenopausal women, making them a clinically acceptable
43 therapy. There was insufficient data for subgroup analysis. Additional studies of current estrogen
44 formulations, modes of administration, and combination therapies, as well as studies in the aging
45 transgender population, are needed to confirm thrombotic risk and clarify optimal therapy regimes.

46 INTRODUCTION

47

48 Biological sex is defined at birth, typically by the visual appearance of the infant genitalia indicating the
49 reproductive organs specific to the chromosomal make up. In contrast, gender is a psychosocial
50 characteristic that develops with a sense of self. Social norms are generally based on the assumption
51 that sex and gender are synonymous, but this is an unfortunate overgeneralization that leads to
52 stereotypes and biases against those who experience gender/sex incongruence.

53

54 People who are transgender do not experience their gender as defined by their sex. This experience is
55 not pathological, but the distress compounded from daily encounters of identity misrepresentation can
56 lead to gender dysphoria, which is associated with depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation(1). A
57 national survey that solicited feedback from over 6,000 transgender people indicated that the suicide
58 attempt rate for the transgender population is approximately 9 times that of the general population
59 (40% vs 4.6%)(2). Standards of care endorse that supporting a transgender person's gender identity,
60 rather than trying to identify the etiology or impose the natal sex as gender, significantly improves their
61 psychosocial health(3). Not all transgender people seek medical interventions to affirm their gender
62 but, for those who do, hormone therapy and/or gender affirmative surgeries are common.

63

64 Transgender women (also referred to as trans women or MtF) were assigned male at birth, but identify
65 as female. Trans feminine individuals will also have been assigned male at birth, but identify on a
66 gender spectrum rather than a distinct binary. Medical management of these populations includes
67 estrogen administration, the goal of which is to feminize by softening skin, altering hair growth patterns,

68 redistributing body fat, altering mood, and decreasing erections (4). Estrogen can be administered
69 orally, topically, or intramuscularly and is most often co-administered with androgen inhibitors such as
70 spironolactone or cyproterone. Although guidelines have been published, there is international
71 variation in prescribing practices, as well as variability in individual compliance and self-medication (3, 5,
72 6).

73

74 Although hormone therapy is considered a vital component of care by clinicians familiar with treating
75 transgender individuals, many primary care physicians are not familiar with management and may be
76 hesitant to prescribe hormone therapy (7). Lack of access to physicians competent in prescribing
77 gender-affirming hormones has been shown to play a role in unprescribed hormone use (8).

78 Documenting the risks associated with hormone treatment may allow for physicians to feel more
79 comfortable with prescribing practices, allowing for better overall management of transgender people
80 (9).

81

82 Previous studies on the clinical effects of combined oral contraceptives or hormone replacement
83 therapy indicate that exogenous estrogen and/or progesterone is associated with an increased risk of
84 thrombotic events (10, 11). This is not unexpected, as both of these hormones are responsible for
85 hemostasis during pregnancy and delivery, and result in increased thrombotic risk during this time.
86 Given this background, it was generally assumed that hormone therapies would also increase the risk of
87 thrombotic events in trans women. While this is a reasonable hypothesis, it is not clear that studies
88 focused on hormone replacement therapy in peri/post menopausal women or on oral contraceptives in
89 premenopausal women can be generalized to predict the risk of hormone therapy in transgender
90 women. Transgender women differ in important ways. For example, transgender women use different

91 estrogen formulations, different doses, differ in age, and, of course, differ with respect to biological sex.
92 For that reason, studies specific to populations of trans women are necessary.

93

94 There have been several previous reviews describing the potential for estrogen to increase thrombotic
95 risk in transgender women (4, 12, 13). These reviews have highlighted the conflicting literature, but no
96 one has attempted to combine the results of individual studies to estimate the risk of estrogen therapy
97 in transgender women. This is problematic because most studies in this area tend to be small and
98 estimates from individual studies will have low reliability. A recent review highlighted thrombosis as a
99 priority in outcomes-based research for transgender women because understanding risk can allow
100 physician and patient to make informed decisions (14). Meta-analysis can combine the results of
101 previous studies to provide better risk estimates. The objective of this study was to conduct a systematic
102 review and meta-analysis to provide an estimate of the risk of venous thrombotic events associated with
103 estrogen therapy in transgender women based on all available evidence.

104

105 **METHODS**

106 This systematic review and meta-analysis was conducted according the Cochrane Guidelines for
107 studies on interventions(15). We also followed Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and
108 Meta-analysis (PRISMA) guidelines(16). A protocol was registered in the Prospero database.

109 Literature Search: Search strategies were developed in consultation with a medical reference librarian
110 (see Supplementary Materials) and executed on April 11, 2018. In brief, we searched PubMed and
111 Embase for studies that included the incidence of thrombotic events in MtF transsexuals receiving

112 estrogen therapy. There were no language or date restrictions. Two additional articles were identified
113 by hand searching the references of the included articles.

114 Study Selection: References were stored and reviewed using Covidence software for systematic reviews
115 (<https://www.covidence.org>). Titles and abstracts were independently evaluated for inclusion by two
116 authors (DG, JK) and discrepancies were resolved by discussion. Full-text review of the potentially
117 relevant articles was independently performed by (DG, JK) and discrepancies were resolved by
118 discussion and third-party review (RS). Each article had data extraction performed independently by
119 two authors (either RS, JK or DG, KS). Studies were included if they had extractable data on the number
120 of thrombotic events per formulation and mode of administration of estrogen therapy. Authors were
121 contacted for clarification if studies lacked data components necessary for analysis.

122 Quality Appraisal: Study quality (risk of bias, lack of generalizability) was independently evaluated by
123 two authors (DG, RS) using the Ottawa Scale for Cohort Studies(17). Discordant results were resolved
124 by discussion.

125 Data Extraction: We used a data collection form to extract data from included articles. We extracted
126 data on the following items: author, date, and language of publication; study design and control group;
127 location and timeframe of the treatment cohort; age range and underlying conditions of the patient
128 population; and doses and treatment duration of estrogen therapy. We created a tabulation of the
129 number of treated patients with and without a thrombotic event by mode and formulation of estrogen
130 therapy.

131 Statistical Methods: We evaluated thrombotic risk by calculating the incidence rate of venous
132 thrombotic events (events per person year). Most studies did not categorize thrombotic events as
133 provoked (e.g. post-surgery, related to trauma) or unprovoked. Thus, the incidence rate includes all
134 thrombotic events (provoked and unprovoked).

135 Meta-analysis was performed using the *metafor* package in R (R Foundation for Statistical
136 Computing)(18). We used the Poisson-normal model to estimate the study-specific incidence rates and
137 the pooled incidence rate. We used this model because in 7 of our 12 studies there were zero events
138 meaning that the estimates could not be calculated using standard meta-analysis methods. The Poisson-
139 normal has been shown previously to estimate these parameters without bias in studies with structural
140 zeros (19). Heterogeneity was measured using Higgins I^2 statistic(20).

141

142 **RESULTS**

143 Literature Search: Initial search results selected 2,032 references for abstract screening (Figure 1). Of
144 these, 1,080 duplicates were removed and the remaining 952 abstracts were screened. Abstract
145 screening indicated that 868 of the references were irrelevant; 84 references proceeded to full text
146 review. Case reports and review articles were the most common exclusion (n=18 each), while wrong
147 outcome (n=10) and wrong study design (n=11) also excluded a significant percent. After excluding
148 commentaries (n=9), duplicates (n=4), and wrong patient population or wrong setting (n=1 each) 12
149 articles/abstracts remained for data extraction(21-32).

150 Characteristics of included studies: We identified twelve studies with data that allowed us to make
151 quantitative estimates of the risk of thrombotic events in MtF transsexuals receiving estrogen therapy
152 (Table 1). All of the studies were single arm (no controls) cohort studies. Ten of the studies (83%) were
153 conducted in Europe, mainly in the Netherlands and Belgium; one study was conducted in the US and
154 one in Canada. The crude incidence rate varied from 0 to 0.009 in individual studies (Figure 2).

155 Earlier studies (before approximately year 2000) administered oral conjugated equine estrogen or
156 ethinyl oestradiol treatment; those after were more likely to administer oral, topical, or intramuscular
157 estradiol valerate. Studies that spanned the time periods included a mixed cohort. Anti-androgen

158 administration remained consistent, with some European countries preferring cyproterone and others
159 preferring GnRH agonists; spironolactone is the commonly prescribed anti-androgen in the US.

160 Duration of monitoring for thrombotic events ranged from 1-10 years, with 7 of the studies having a
161 duration less than or equal to 2 years and 6 of the studies having a duration of greater than or equal to
162 3.8 years.

163 Sample sizes were variable across the different studies and ranged from 32-816 individuals, 7 of the
164 studies included less than or equal to 60 participants.

165
166 Venous thrombotic risk: The overall estimate of the incidence rate was 0.0023 (95% CI:0.0008 – 0.0069)
167 (Table 1, Figure 2). The heterogeneity was significant ($I^2 = 74%$, $p = 0.0039$).

168 Quality Appraisal: Studies had variable quality, depending on the metric. All studies had excellent
169 rankings for representativeness of the exposed cohort, ascertainment of exposure, demonstrating that
170 the outcome of interest was not present at the start of the study, assessment of outcome and adequacy
171 of follow-up. Studies had moderate ratings for length of follow-up being sufficient for outcomes to
172 occur (assuming one event/500 patient-years). The most apparent quality limitation of the studies was
173 their ability to utilize control groups, which was indicated by the poor scores for selection of exposed
174 cohort and comparability of cohorts.

175 **DISCUSSION**

176 This review provides an estimate of the crude incidence rate for venous thrombotic events in
177 transgender women treated with estrogen therapy. We used meta-analysis to combine the results from
178 12 studies and estimated that the incidence rate was 0.0023 (95% CI:0.0008 – 0.0069). The estimated
179 incidence rate of thrombotic events in the general population is between 0.00104 and 0.00183(33). The

180 estimated relative risk of thrombotic events in pre-menopausal women prescribed combined oral
181 contraceptives is 3.5 (95% CI: 2.9-4.3) (10). Our data suggest that the risk of thrombotic events in trans
182 women taking estrogen therapy is slightly higher than the risk of thrombotic events in the general
183 population and comparable to the risk of thrombotic risks associated with oral contraceptives in
184 premenopausal women.

185 We found significant heterogeneity in the estimates of thrombotic risk between studies. This is
186 consistent with the informal findings of previous narrative reviews. Unfortunately, the number of
187 studies was insufficient to perform subgroup analyses to explore the sources of heterogeneity. There
188 are many potential sources of heterogeneity. These include mode of administration (oral vs
189 transdermal), dose, type of androgen blocker (spironolactone vs cyproterone acetate). Given the
190 variation in these factors, it is not surprising that we found significant heterogeneity in the estimated
191 incidence rates. Although the heterogeneity is statistically significant, it is unlikely that it is clinically
192 significant. Oral contraception is widely accepted and, as noted above, is about 3.5 times greater than
193 the background risk in the general population. By comparison, our results suggest that the risk of
194 therapy in trans women is approximately 50 to 80% greater than the background risk. When compared
195 to the risk associated with oral contraception, the heterogeneity in results in thrombotic risk to trans
196 women has little practical impact. Thus, despite the presence of statistically significant heterogeneity,
197 our results suggest the risk of thrombosis associated with estrogen treatment in transgender women is
198 clinically acceptable.

199 Our study may overestimate the risk of thrombosis because we included several older studies
200 (i.e., pre ~2000) that included data prior to the introduction of estrogen valerate. The conjugated and
201 synthetic estrogens previously prescribed are thought to pose more of a thrombotic risk. There is
202 controversy regarding if this increased risk is due to the type of estrogen or the route of administration
203 (34). The earlier estrogens were administered orally only; estrogen valerate is administered orally,

204 intramuscularly, and topically. The existing data isn't partitioned in a way that allows us to discriminate
205 between modes of estrogen valerate administration. Additionally, we wanted to include all available
206 studies from the literature. Thus, our meta-analysis most likely over-estimates thrombotic risk of
207 contemporary prescribing practices.

208 A gap in the literature is that the majority of studies were performed in Europe, which has different
209 prescribing practices compared to the US. In general, European countries will have nationalized
210 healthcare that allows for the standardized treatment of trans feminine gender incongruence. In
211 contrast, the US has a diverse range of patients with differing access to care (9). Additionally, the anti-
212 androgens commonly used in Europe are not FDA cleared for use in the US (cyproterone acetate) or are
213 cost prohibitive (GnRH agonists). This distinction is not only relevant for calculating thrombotic risk, but
214 also relevant to almost any study that seeks to investigate the influence of hormonal treatment on
215 transgender women. Of the 12 articles included in our study, 10 were from European countries (and
216 one was from Canada), which did not allow for sufficient data to perform a sub-group analysis.
217 Determining whether there is a difference in rate of thrombotic events between the European and
218 American therapeutic regimens should be an area of future study. In general, there is a need for more
219 clinical data particular to the transgender population in the US.

220

221 There are several limitations to our analysis. First, there was insufficient data to compare risk
222 associated with different therapies. We could not perform subgroup analysis to investigate sources of
223 heterogeneity. Second, the studies did not include control groups, which limited our analysis to
224 reporting the crude incidence rate rather than the incidence rate ratio. Finally, the incidence rate
225 includes the background risk.

226

227 Additional studies are needed to address the relative contribution of estrogen formulation,
228 mode of administration, and co-administered anti-androgen medications to thrombotic risk. Some
229 researchers have speculated that the increased thrombotic risk is a function of first pass liver
230 metabolism of oral estrogens. This may not be true, as oral estradiol valerate may impose little risk
231 relative to topical. A recent study demonstrated an eight-fold higher incidence of VTE with CEE
232 compared to oral estradiol suggesting that the formulation of estrogen used rather than the route of
233 delivery may be more important for determining thrombotic risk (Seal 2012). Cyproterone acetate is a
234 highly potent anti-androgen typically used in Europe and has been reported to have procoagulant
235 effects. As it is not available in the USA and spironolactone is the more commonly used anti-androgen,
236 current literature may overestimate the thrombosis risk in the USA.

237 Future studies should also address the overall risk in the aging population. The average age for
238 participants in these studies was 30 years old. This average age is representative of many trans women,
239 but may not adequately predict risk in those who are aging or have underlying co-morbidities,
240 particularly smoking and obesity.

241
242 Conclusion: The risk of venous thrombotic events associated with estrogen therapy for trans women is
243 less/comparable to the risk associated with oral contraceptives in premenopausal women. There is no
244 evidence to suggest that there is a difference in the response to estrogen (thrombotic risk) in sex-
245 assigned men and women.

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340

341 Table 1: Characteristics of Included Studies (Submitted as supplemental table due to formatting issues
342 inserting such a large document into word document)

343

344

345 Figure Legends

346 Figure 1: PRISMA Diagram illustrating literature search results

347

348 Figure 2: Forest plot of included studies. The squares indicate the incidence rate (IR) of each individual
349 study. The size of the square is proportional to the weight given each study in the meta-analysis. The
350 whiskers indicate the 95% confidence interval for the IR for each individual study. The diamond at the
351 bottom is the overall estimate based on all studies. The width of the diamond is the 95% confidence
352 interval of the overall estimate. The numbers follow each study are the individual study estimate and
353 the 95% confidence interval. RE = random effects.

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