



Progesterone: from its beginnings to today

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The history of progesterone begins in 1933 by Corner and Allen, when the hormone in a crystalline form was isolated and named "Progestin". In the same year the structural formula of the hormone (C₂₁H₃₀O₂) was determined by Wintersteiner and Allen, and as Allen later recalled the formula was first sketched on a napkin during a lunch with W. Strain, long before the definitive structural proof was furnished! The early production of the progesterone (P4) was laborious, complex and expensive: \$1000 per gram! Some years later a genius chemist, R.E. Marker was able to obtain from diosgenin the progesterone with a unique chemical process: the "Marker's degradation". These successful results led Marker to a search for plants that stored diosgenin and he found in Mexico the right plant the "dioscorea barbasco". Marker arranged in some manner a plantation in Mexico and started to produce P4: the price decreased to \$80 per gram and then to \$10 per gram. However he found the plants stolen more times and the more the P4 production increased the more problems raised in the plantations and controversies also raised with some important chemical industries. The history of P4 got like a thriller! In view of these facts Marker sold his company the Botanica-Mex and shifted from steroid chemistry to rococo-style silver! The work of Marker opened the doors to the contraceptive pill and to the various progestins that are actually employed in clinical practice.