

Hormonal Superhealth

You don't have to suffer from PMS, menopausal symptoms, painful or heavy periods or other hormone-related health problems. Not with today's natural approach to hormonal imbalances.

The chocolate attacks disappeared, so did the bloated stomach and teary spells - within a month of following a nutrition programme designed to balance her hormones, Karen found that her PMS was almost unnoticeable. It may surprise many women to learn that most women's 'things' are simply not inevitable curses of nature. Almost any hormonally-related health problem, from niggling symptoms that accompany periods to more pronounced conditions such as endometriosis can be traced back to some degree of hormonal imbalance which can be set straight with the right nutrition. Being aware of how dealing with factors such as stress and a deficiency in important nutrients can contribute to hormonal problems can get you on the right track for trouble-free hormonal changes. Here's how...

Hormonal Patterns

The two main female hormones are oestrogen and progesterone. These are called steroid hormones because they are fat-like, originally made from cholesterol which is produced in the liver. Testosterone and the stress-hormone cortisol are also steroid hormones. The body has to balance these according to your needs. For example, if you are under a lot of stress your body may struggle to produce enough cortisol which is involved in the body's response to stress, at the expense of the others. This is why sex drive diminishes when you're stressed, because the body produces less testosterone which, in both men and women, controls sex drive.

Stressed out?

Have you ever noticed how when you're premenstrual, or in the throes of a menopausal episode, you feel pretty stressed out? As you can see in the diagram, progesterone, oestrogen and the adrenal-stress hormones are derived from the same source. Stress knocks your hormonal patterns out of rhythm because there is going to be a greater demand on the raw materials. Stress also places a greater demand on the body's nutrient reserves, leaving you tired and in a vicious circle of feeling less able to cope with stress. You could take all the measures available to try to rebalance your hormones, but while you are stressed you are unlikely to see much difference.

The way hormones are made is just one of the main underlying processes in the body that dictates the ebb and flow, balance or imbalance of our hormones, especially the important ratio between oestrogen and progesterone. Another is the monthly hormonal pattern, the balance between the two throughout the menstrual cycle, which is crucial. While very few women's bodies actually follow the textbook pattern shown, it is the ratios between these two hormones that dictates balance, or not. Critical times in hormonal shifts are ovulation and the lead-up to a period, and of course, when a woman is going through the menopause. At such times, the potential

for symptoms related to hormones such as mood swings, bloatedness etc. to show up increases.

Hormonal Testing

You can find out whether your hormones are out of balance, to what degree and when in your cycle, with simple yet sophisticated tests. PMS (tension, anxiety, depression, bloating, breast tenderness, mood swings, irritability, cravings), heavy or painful periods, irregular periods infertility, ovarian cysts, fibroids, endometriosis, polycystic ovarian syndrome, fibrocystic breasts, menopausal symptoms (hot flushes, depression, insomnia, fatigue, vaginal dryness, weight gain), hormone-related cancers (breast, ovarian, uterine, endometrial, vaginal) - all involve an imbalance in hormonal patterns. Saliva tests to show your hormone levels are available for home testing. Interpreting these tests is best done with the guidance of a health care professional, but this is not essential. A common cause of both PMS and especially menopausal problems is progesterone deficiency and/or oestrogen excess.

Various laboratories offer testing of your hormonal profile using saliva samples. You simply suck on a cotton baton on various designated days (usually every three days) over a month and a pattern can then be drawn of your hormone levels. This can be very useful in detecting if and when you have imbalances in the progesterone: oestrogen ratio and what they are. You can ask a nutritionist to arrange one of these tests for you and then to design a programme based on the results. If you have any serious symptoms that you suspect may be linked to your hormones, it is important to visit your doctor so that the possibility of any more serious underlying condition can be eliminated or dealt with.

PMG - Premenstrual Greed

Now a look at that seemingly unstoppable urge for chocolate or starchy foods which rears its head just before your period. There is a connection between an imbalance in oestrogen and progesterone and the way the body uses the hormone insulin. Insulin is primarily used by the body to deal with glucose (sugar). If there is excess insulin (due to a high sugar or starch intake) or the body is not responding to insulin properly this can trigger increased levels of the hormone testosterone production, which will in turn suppress ovulation. And any disruption to ovulation will have a knock-on effect on the production of progesterone. Stress also affects the body's ability to keep the insulin mechanism which controls blood sugar levels in place.

How Hormones Work

Hormones are, in effect, chemical messengers which travel around the body, providing information. Once they reach the cell to which they are giving the message, they dock onto a receptor site on its surface in order to begin transmission, so to speak. This docking process is another potential hiccup in the mission to have hormones well balanced. Firstly, if the cell membrane is not particularly healthy itself, the receptor site may not work properly. To minimise the risk of this, make sure you are getting a good supply of the essential fats which are so crucial to the health of the

membrane - these are found in seeds, nuts and fish and their oils or can be taken in a linseed, fish or other oil supplement such as GLA.

What Intercepts the Messages?

Probably one of the most insidious processes which is leading increasingly to hormonal imbalance in women is what is known as oestrogen dominance. When the ratio of oestrogen in relation to progesterone rises, the likelihood of hormonally-related problems does too. We are currently exposed to a huge range of substances known as xeno-oestrogens, i.e. 'outsider' oestrogens which act as hormone disruptors. They are largely man-made chemicals found in the pesticides sprayed our food, plastics, medications (especially hormonal ones), detergents and other chemicals; such toxins also get stored in fat cells - not just ours but also in animals. These powerful substances can 'over-oestrogenise' a woman, so that the receptor sites on her cells become blocked, which disturbs the carefully tuned rhythm of her normal hormonal messaging. Consider this - a cow eats grass and feed that have been exposed to chemicals, the cow is given hormones to sustain permanent milk production, the milk which naturally contains fat is made into cheese, we wrap the cheese in plastic film. It's not difficult to see how easy it is to be exposed to such chemicals in every day life - leaving hormonal messaging in potential chaos.

Fine-Tuning the Signals

That's the bad news and while it is clearly important to minimise our exposure to these xeno-oestrogens, the good news is that there are ways of helping nudge oestrogen levels back into balance. Certain substances in plants known as phyto-oestrogens (phyto=plant) have been discovered which can help to block the effect of excess oestrogen. This way, any imbalance in the ratio between oestrogen and progesterone can be evened out. The way in which they work may initially seem rather contradictory: these phyto-oestrogens lock into the oestrogen receptor sites on cells. In doing so, they block out the xeno-oestrogens. At the same time, if a woman is actually low in oestrogen, such as during the menopause, they will act as a weak oestrogen, thereby helping relieve her symptoms by increasing levels; and at the same time, they block out the harmful xeno-oestrogens. This is known as an 'adaptogenic' effect i.e. the phyto-oestrogens act to balance oestrogens, whether they are too high or too low.

Minimising Your Chemical Exposure

limit or avoid your exposure to the following:

- pesticides and fertilisers by eating organic food
- bleached products whenever possible use unbleached versions e.g. teabags, toilet paper, tampons
- cling film and other plastic food storage - use PVC-free varieties, glass, ceramic or paper instead
- hormonal medication - only use if absolutely necessary
- tap water - use bottled water to avoid possible presence of residues of chemicals and hormones

Particularly powerful phyto-oestrogens are found in soya products - particularly two of its constituents, genistein and daidzein. The high soya content in traditional Japanese diets is likely to be why Japanese women tend not to suffer from menopausal symptoms. Other foods which contain phyto-oestrogens are chickpeas, beans, lentils, rye, alfalfa, and citrus fruits. Such chemicals are also found in several herbs such as Mexican yam, Black cohosh, Dong quai, Agnus castus and many others. You can take these orally in capsules or in a cream which you apply to your skin. Many women find immense relief from menopausal symptoms and all sorts of other hormonal problems by supplementing such phyto-oestrogens.

Don't take each of these herbs separately - several companies make excellent blends of such herbs, expertly balanced to maximise their effects. Some come in combination with nutrients that have been shown to help relieve symptoms of PMS or menopause such as vitamins E or B6. Other nutrients which are important are the antioxidants such as vitamins A and C (also E, again) and other nutrients such as glutathione, CoQ10 and lipoic acid. These help protect the steroid hormones and cell membranes from any damage and are, again, widely available in blends, rather than having to be taken separately.

Take note here though, that contrary to claims by some less scrupulous companies which make products containing such herbs, they are not converted into progesterone in the body (which may be desirable if progesterone is low in relation to oestrogen). They take effect by acting in the adaptogenic way described above. However, if your progesterone levels are low in relation to oestrogen, you can use a natural progesterone cream on your skin, which, as it is absorbed does just this. For more information on this cream, contact the Natural Progesterone Information Service on 07000 784849.

The Role of Food

In addition eating foods rich in phytonutrients and essential fatty acids, eating organic, another important factor is eating plenty of foods which are naturally high in fibre. These include beans, lentils, oats, brown rice, vegetables and fruits. When oestrogen has been used, it is processed by the liver and passed into the intestine where it binds to fibre to be carried out of the body - this encourages the excretion of the unwanted oestrogen and a lack of fibre will do the opposite. Cruciferous vegetables such as cabbage, broccoli, kale and Brussels sprouts contain substances known as glucosinolates. These plant chemicals have been found to help the way in which the liver processes oestrogen for it to be excreted from the body. Alcohol can interfere with the way in which the body processes oestrogen, so keeping that to a minimum is important.

Even without carrying out a hormonal profile, implementing the strategies described can have far-reaching effects on balancing your hormones, whether you get mild premenstrual symptoms, have a more debilitating condition such as endometriosis or are going through the menopause. By combining the dietary recommendations with a comprehensive supplement programme, being at the whim of your hormones can become a thing of the past.

Hormonal Harmony: A Strategy

Diet

- Eat at least 2 servings of phyto-oestrogen-rich foods in your diet per day
- Include foods rich in essential fatty acids in your diet - seeds, nuts, fish
- Include plenty of foods which are naturally rich in fibre - include beans, lentils, oats, brown rice, vegetables and fruits
- Eat organic foods as much as possible
- Increase your intake of cruciferous vegetables - cabbage, broccoli, kale and Brussels sprouts
- Drink bottled or well-filtered water
- Minimise your intake of sugar and sugary foods or drinks
- Reduce your intake of animal fats - milk, cheese, cream
- Limit your alcohol intake to no more than three units, three times a week, and have some weeks completely alcohol-free

Supplements

- Phyto-oestrogen supplements. Soya extracts: look for a soya product that contains active isoflavones genistein and daidzein produced from organic, GM-free soya. Herbs such as Mexican yam, black cohosh, dong quai, agnus castus best taken in a blend such as Higher Nature's Premens (PMS), Menophase (menopause) capsules or Mexican Wild Yam Cream.
- Essential fatty acid supplement such as linseed oil, GLA or fish oil. If you take fish oil, take a supplement that contains 300-400mg of DHA/EPA; for GLA, make sure you are getting at least 100mg of GLA.
- Antioxidant supplement that contains at least vitamins A, C and E, minerals zinc and selenium plus extras such as glutathione, CoQ10, berry extracts and/or lipoic acid

Also...

- Minimise your exposure to hormone disruptors
- Reduce your stress levels - take measures to deal with stressful issues and take time out to relax
- Test your hormone balance – if you're deficient in progesterone consider using natural progesterone cream.