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BALANCE

By Laurie Budgar

hormones NATURALLY

Safe, gentle
ways to feel
your best at
any age

It's not just puberty and menopause: Women experience hormonal changes throughout their lives. New research shows the onset of menopausal symptoms is often linked to hallmarks of the modern Western lifestyle, including nutrient-poor diets of refined foods, alcohol consumption, smoking, chronic stress, depression, lack of exercise, and exposure to endocrine-disrupting toxins found in common household products. ➤

The good news about symptoms is that “women get a wake-up call,” says Marcelle Pick, RNC, MSN, an ob-gyn nurse practitioner. “When the body is out of balance, it really screams at them. Men have heart attacks. Women have an opportunity to get really healthy.” Making smart lifestyle changes—especially *before* peak transition times—can help smooth out symptoms, says Alicia Stanton, MD, an integrative physician.



pregnancy years

“Hormones tend to be more stable when women are in their 20s and 30s, unless they have a boatload of stress,” says Pick, who cofounded Women to Women, an integrative clinic that serves women both online and in person. Ordinarily, estrogen is high in the first half of your cycle. Then estrogen comes down and progesterone goes up; they both plunge right before your period.

But many women—Stanton estimates as many as 80 percent—have a condition known as estrogen dominance, an imbalance believed to be triggered partly by excess body fat, poor diet, stress, and exposure to estrogenic factors in the environment, such as toxins leached from most plastics. “Either there’s too much estrogen in the system or not enough progesterone to balance the estrogen,” says Jennifer Johnson, ND, clinical faculty member at the University of Bridgeport College of Naturopathic Medicine.

Potential problems

PMS. Johnson says symptoms during the pre-period hormone drop may be worse for women with estrogen dominance. Common symptoms include headaches, breast tenderness, irritability, depression, bloating, and cravings.

Infertility. If you’ve ruled out structural problems (such as blocked fallopian tubes)—as well as issues with your male partner—and still can’t get pregnant, you may have low progesterone levels in the second half of your cycle.

Cysts or fibroids. “Estrogen is the proliferative hormone,” explains Erin Lommen, ND. That means it helps grow the uterine lining to prepare for pregnancy, but it also grows cysts, fibroids, and cancers. “Progesterone is the balancer.”

How to feel your best

Try a natural progesterone cream. You can pick this up without a prescription, but first be sure your progesterone levels really are low. Your doctor can do a saliva or urine test to find out. Look for a low-dose (2 percent) topical cream and check the ingredient list for USP progesterone. Apply about ¼ teaspoon to the neck, face, chest, or inner arms; rotate the application site daily. Natural progesterone cream is safe for women when used as directed, says Pick, but a health care provider should monitor any woman using hormones. Women with breast cancer or a history of breast cancer should not use these creams.

Try supplements. Clamp down on crankiness with a B-complex that has at least 50 mg of B6. Take 2,000–3,000 mg of high-quality fish oil each day, with meals, to reduce inflammation and cortisol demand. Johnson suggests evening primrose oil, 1,200–1,500 mg per day with meals, to ease cramps and help with other estrogen-dominance symptoms. Dandelion—100–200 mg, or ½ teaspoon of tincture, or a few cups of tea daily—minimizes bloating and helps the liver eliminate excess hormones; it may not be safe for people on diuretics. For fertility issues, try vitex, or chasteberry, 300–400 mg daily unless you are already taking prescribed fertility hormones or are undergoing in vitro fertilization, Johnson says.

Avoid environmental and dietary estrogen sources. These include many plastic water bottles; canned foods with BPA in the lining; personal care products with potentially hormone-disrupting chemicals, such as parabens, phthalates, triclosan, and synthetic fragrances; and nonorganic meats and dairy. ♦♦

THE LATEST ON HRT

Women in their 50s who'd had hysterectomies and took **estrogen** had fewer heart attacks, colon cancers, and breast cancers—but slightly higher risk for strokes, blood clots, and hip fractures, the Women's Health Initiative reported in April. Taking just estrogen raises uterine cancer risk if you still have your uterus, says Marcelle Pick, RNC. Taking **natural progesterone** (not progestin) is safe, many practitioners believe. Check with your doctor before taking any hormones.

Perimenopause



About ten years before menopause, your egg quality declines and your hormones begin to shift—estrogen diminishes a little, and progesterone plummets.

Potential problems

Brain fog. Researchers suspect lower estrogen may be partly to blame for the difficulty some women report with memory and decision-making—but the stress of busy lives makes it worse, Pick says. Chronic stress causes overproduction of the hormone cortisol, which can lead to adrenal fatigue, a collection of symptoms including insomnia, headaches, fatigue, anxiety, and inability to concentrate.

Weight gain. Yep, stress can make you fat. Cortisol releases sugar into the bloodstream to provide fuel in stressful times, and insulin mops up the excess. With too much sugar to process, the body becomes insulin resistant and converts the excess to belly fat, or visceral fat, which is linked to greater risk for heart disease. “Visceral fat is harder to lose,” Lommen says.

Sleep problems and hot flashes. Perimenopausal women may have trouble falling or staying asleep, possibly due to low progesterone, high cortisol demands, or a disturbance in melatonin, the sleep-wake hormone. Erratic estrogen levels cause hot flashes, says Pick.

How to feel your best

Eat right, sleep, and meditate to keep cortisol and insulin stable. Choose low-glycemic foods like lean proteins and complex carbs, which break down more slowly in the body. Sleep seven hours a night to stabilize cortisol and balance appetite hormones leptin and ghrelin. One new study found that women who participated in a program of meditating and mindful stretching had fewer, less-intense hot flashes, better sleep quality, and less anxiety.

Consider bio-identical hormones. “They’re the exact same structure as the hormones your body makes,” unlike the hormones used in the now-infamous Women’s Health Initiative study, Stanton says. (See “The Latest on HRT,” above.) Still, bio-identicals remain controversial. “They haven’t been studied to the same degree,” Johnson says. “But I see women having fewer problems adjusting to being on them, and fewer side effects.” Women with a family history of breast cancer, blood clots, stroke, or heart disease should consult their physicians. A natural progesterone cream may improve symptoms, if you know your progesterone is low. ➔

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Menopause

Menopause occurs when you haven't had your period for a year. At this point, you really start to lose estrogen. "Estrogen is anti-inflammatory, so when it declines, some people have huge problems with joints. Others have hot flashes; some can't sleep; some are very anxious," Pick says. Research shows estrogen may also protect the heart, brain, bones, and more.

Potential problems

Bone loss. Lower levels of estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone contribute to a more rapid loss in bone mass.

Risk for heart disease, Alzheimer's, and certain cancers. "Hormones send messages between the brain, glands, and organs, and regulate inflammation," Stanton says. "Every imbalance in hormones creates an imbalance in the body."

How to feel your best

Take vitamin D (2,000 IU daily) for bone health, along with calcium (1,200–1,500 mg total daily from diet and supplements) and 400–600 mg magnesium; take all with food. For best absorption, split calcium into 500-mg doses, taking the last dose in the evening with magnesium. Reduce magnesium dose if loose stools result. "Vitamin D is also anti-inflammatory," says Stanton. Ideally, get your D levels tested in spring and fall, and aim for a result between 30 and 50 ng/ml, Pick says.

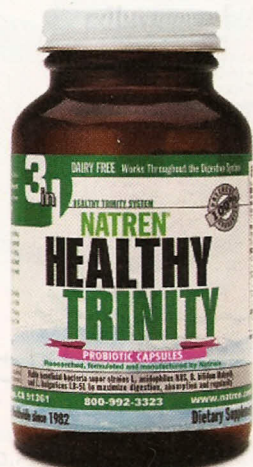
Keep active and do weight-bearing exercise, like standing on one leg—really. It puts pressure on hips, which lose bone mass easily, Johnson says. In one study of postmenopausal women, physical exercise also reduced menopausal symptoms and significantly enhanced quality of life, independent of whether participants were taking hormone therapy.

And what about the years after menopause? "We keep making hormones, we just aren't cycling them monthly," Stanton says. "So the women who have sailed through menopause have stable, low levels of hormones." Still, a major stressor can trigger symptoms. To avoid a return to imbalance, Pick says, "continue to have joy in life, and keep taking steps toward vitality." ☺

Laurie Budgar is a writer in Longmont, Colorado, who was thrilled to learn simple lifestyle changes can ease life's transitions.

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