



Blame it on your hormones

Feeling hormonal doesn't only happen once a month.

Weight gain, tiredness and anxiety could all be the result of a system that's out of balance. Here's

how to restore your equilibrium.

By Jane Hughes.

Illustrations Neil Leslie

You must know what it's like. One minute you're on top of the world, the next you're ready to burst into tears or snap at the slightest provocation. You blame your hormones, but because it's easy to chart emotional and physical changes in relation to the menstrual cycle, you probably only have two in mind: oestrogen and progesterone.

In fact, the body produces more than 100 hormones (plus possibly hundreds more – the true figure is disputed by experts), which control vital functions including metabolism, digestion, growth and reproduction. Excessive or depleted levels can leave you tired or anxious, and lead to a weakened immune system, weight gain, infertility, skin problems and excess body hair.

Diet, stress, infections, sedentary lifestyles and the Pill can all skew the balance, but there are steps you can take to restore it. The first is to understand exactly what your hormones do...



YOUR METABOLISM

It starts with dry skin and brittle nails, which you put down to office air conditioning and your takeaway-heavy diet. Then you notice you've gained weight, you feel tired all the time and your libido is at an all-time low. Maybe you

just need a few more vitamins, but there's also a chance your thyroid could be to blame.

This butterfly-shaped gland, just below the voice box, produces the hormones T3 (triiodothyronine) and T4 (thyroxine). They help regulate energy, body temperature and sleep patterns by influencing the metabolism.

One in 10 of us experiences some form of thyroid dysfunction, though this is often too mild to be clinically diagnosed. The most common is a failure to make enough thyroid hormones, leading to the symptoms above. This is usually triggered by an autoimmune disorder – when a person's immune system attacks their own body. Hyperthyroidism occurs when excessive hormones are produced, leading to a racing metabolism with increased sweating, hunger, fatigue, weight loss, anxiety and palpitations. Again, this is generally triggered by an autoimmune reaction and may be linked to infection, trauma or stress.

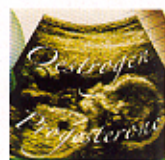
FINDING A BALANCE

Your GP can check for an underactive thyroid with a blood test and treat it with synthetic thyroxine. Overactivity is corrected with drugs that dampen the autoimmune response.

- Less severe hormone depletion is treatable with complementary alternatives, such as acupuncture or herbal and mineral supplements. Always consult a professional.
- Iodine levels influence hormone production, ➤

so a nutritionist can advise you on changes to your diet, including supplements of natural, uniodised sea salt or kelp to help increase iodine levels.

- Avoid low-calorie diets that restrict the supply of nutrients necessary for thyroid function. Eat lots of fruit and vegetables containing B vitamins, iron, selenium and zinc.



REPRODUCTION AND FERTILITY

This is the area we're most aware of when it comes to

our hormones. This is no surprise when you consider that oestrogen and progesterone affect three major aspects of a woman's life – the menstrual cycle, pregnancy and post-childbirth. The sex hormones influence brain chemistry and can trigger depression and anxiety, particularly if there's an imbalance. Levels may be affected by stress, body fat, under- or over-exercising and the Pill, which can cause natural production to fall.

Oestrogen and progesterone are secreted by the ovaries and regulate the menstrual cycle. Levels of oestrogen peak just before ovulation, and progesterone increases before menstruation. Imbalances or deficiencies can affect fertility. In addition, progesterone is responsible for healthy foetal development. Too much causes lethargy and weight gain. Oestrogen encourages cells to grow and reproduce, but excessive amounts are a risk factor in many cancers, while too little causes thinning of the bones.

FINDING A BALANCE

- If you think you have a problem, talk to your GP or ask a specialist health practitioner to monitor your hormone levels with saliva testing and by recording physical and emotional changes during your cycle. Herbs such as blue cohosh, angelica and sarsaparilla can help.
- Acupuncture is also effective at locating and treating imbalances.
- Watch your stress levels.
- Good nutrition fuels healthy biochemistry. Cut down on caffeine, tobacco, alcohol, refined sugars and carbohydrates. Increase consumption of protein, fresh fruit and veg.
- Do 30 minutes of strenuous exercise three times a week.



MOOD BUSTERS

You may attribute your emotional highs and lows to the roller coaster of your life. But while a bad-hair

day can trigger the odd hissy fit in the best of us, something else could be affecting your moods.

Our feelings are affected by the interaction of hormones and the four emotion-generating



THE ENERGY FACTOR

Do you notice a link between your anxiety levels and your health? If you're struggling to cope with a stressful work or home life and suffering from persistent infections, your levels of adrenaline and cortisol, produced by the adrenal glands at the top of the kidneys, could be out of control.

Adrenaline gives us an initial surge of energy in stressful situations by increasing heart rate and blood flow. Cortisol

helps regulate body processes and controls the use of fats, proteins and carbohydrates for growth and nutrition. Levels of both shoot up to provide you with strength and stamina in traumatic situations. But prolonged exposure – say, if you work long hours in a difficult job, or you're a carer with few respite breaks – can weaken your immune system and put excessive strain on organs.

Lifestyle factors also play their part, as even minor disturbances in the hormone balance can lead to fatigue and a feeling that you're functioning below par. A diet high in sugar and refined carbohydrates makes the stress response hormones work overtime to stabilise blood sugar levels, and yeast infections, illness, allergens,

over-exercising and artificial stimulants, such as caffeine, are also stressors.

FINDING A BALANCE

- Don't panic – serious adrenal failure is relatively rare. It is diagnosed by a blood test and an endocrinologist will prescribe replacement hormones.
- Complementary practitioners offer treatments for milder hormone depletion – indicated by saliva or muscle testing – such as natural supplements and hands-on therapy.
- Reduce stress, exercise sensibly and take time to relax.
- Support your adrenals by eating healthily. And don't skip meals. This stresses the body by restricting energy and nutrient supplies.
- Reduce your exposure to toxins by eating organic food and using natural products as much as possible.

neurotransmitter chemicals in the brain. These are serotonin (fends off depression and anxiety), endorphins (feel-good chemicals), catecholamines (dopamine, adrenaline and noradrenalin, which stimulate zest and excitement) and GABA (natural Valium).

Oestrogen is a natural upper because it helps programme serotonin levels, but too much or too little reduces both serotonin and catecholamines. A lack of thyroid hormones has the same effect. Progesterone – a natural downer – promotes calmness by controlling the release of GABA. A deficiency can trigger anxiety, while excess levels are linked to depression and PMS. Prolonged high levels of the stress hormone cortisol are also linked to depression.

FINDING A BALANCE

- Stress drains your stores of good-mood chemicals, so take time to relax and get plenty of REM sleep to promote psychic repair.
- Avoid refined sugar and starchy foods. These set off mood swings and unbalance emotional chemistry by 'forcing' the rapid release of feel-good neurotransmitters. When blood sugar levels subsequently plummet, you crave more starch and the cycle starts again.
- Boost your neurotransmitters with brain foods high in nutrients. Fresh fruit and vegetables, omega-3 fatty acids (found in oily fish), wholegrain carbs and amino acid-rich chicken, beef, eggs and cheese are ideal.
- Eat regular meals to keep blood sugar levels

stable – serotonin dips when you skip meals.

- Exercise regularly. This releases endorphins and combats stress and depression.



YOUR BODY, YOUR WEIGHT

Have you ever wondered why any weight you gain goes straight on your

midriff, while your friend piles it on her thighs? Storing fat around your waist could indicate your insulin levels are on the up. Insulin is produced by the pancreas and its main function is to regulate blood sugar levels by stimulating muscles to absorb and store glucose.

Lack of exercise and a diet high in sugar and saturated fat can lead to insulin resistance or syndrome X, in which increasing amounts of the hormone are needed to keep blood sugar in check. As the body struggles to cope, glucose is stored as fat, particularly around the midriff and in the liver. Weight gain increases insulin resistance and a cluster of symptoms, including high cholesterol and high blood pressure, emerges. One in five of us is estimated to be insulin-resistant. Left unchecked, it increases the risk of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and pre-eclampsia.

FINDING A BALANCE

- Replace sweets and rapidly absorbed simple carbohydrates with lean proteins, fruit and vegetables and wholegrain carbohydrates.
- Exercise regularly to stay in shape. ■