

Health Foundations Part 2: *Women's Hormones and Health*

By Dr. Jin Li Dong

Menstrual cycles, PMS, hot flashes—we women have to deal with a complex assortment of hormones that can bring us from cloud nine to a spiraling descent into darkness in moments. These women's issues affect every aspect of our lives, from our productivity at work to our family interactions. Too often women in their frustration catch any straw, any chance they hear about, to help regulate their hormones. What many are not aware of is that doing so without a sound understanding of what's going on in your body is a recipe for disaster. As something that I've gone through and studied myself, women's health is very close to my heart. From infertility treatments to preventing cancer or hot flashes, women have many natural options to regulate that monthly time bomb.

How does all this work? Here's a refresher in biology. Both estrogen and progesterone are produced mostly by the ovaries and regulate much more than the menstrual cycle. Estrogen can directly activate around 137 genes, regulating things from metabolism and muscle mass to blood clotting and sodium balance. Estrogen is also important for reducing bone resorption (how osteoporosis develops) and helps us develop our womanly features. While the main function of progesterone is to ready the body for pregnancy, progesterone also has anti-inflammatory, muscle relaxing, and blood mineral normalization properties. Normal levels of estrogen and progesterone change drastically through the menstrual cycle.



We've all heard or experienced the menstrual horror stories—inexplicable thoughts and actions, violent cramping, tenderness in the breast, bloating, disinterest and depression. This is usually due to either low hormone levels or imbalanced progesterone to estrogen ratio. Without getting too detail oriented, both estrogen and progesterone have powerful effects on the body and brain. When in balance, not only does your body feel normal, but your mental and emotional state is also stable. Low levels of estrogen or progesterone, or a skewed progesterone to estrogen ratio, is what causes PMS and other issues. Other than the obvious and painful problems that arise from hormone imbalance, low levels of progesterone can also result in insomnia, poor memory, increased stress and anxiety, decreased HDL (good cholesterol), and cravings for carbohydrates

and sweets. Over time, some imbalances like high estrogen levels can result in higher chances of developing cancer. This is because estrogen aids in the development and division of certain cells in the body, including those of the breast. In an environment of high estrogen levels, cell division is also stimulated and can result in cancer anywhere in the body, but most commonly in the uterine, breast or lungs. This is especially alarming for women who are genetically predisposed to high estrogen levels, increasing their cancer risk by 30 to 35 percent. While there have been many advances in cancer research and treatment, not enough work has been done on cancer prevention. With a few diet changes, natural sources of hormones, and regular hormone tests, you can ensure normal hormone levels and reduce the risk of cancer.

Another important piece of the hormone puzzle is the use of hormone replacement therapies. While crucial for many women, taking hormones without knowing your current hormone levels and imbalances may only exacerbate the problem. For example, many women assume that as they grow older they need estrogen replacements when their actual estrogen levels are normal. What then happens is they create problems like hot flashes, cramps and mood swings while increasing their cancer risk. Progesterone creams are another culprit. Many women report that they feel great improvement when they first start using progesterone creams, but after some time start feeling worse. This is because the progesterone in the creams don't all get absorbed into the body at once—a lot of it stays under the skin and is released over time. After weeks of accumulating progesterone on your skin, your doses get more and more potent, until they are bad for you. Any hormone cream faces this problem, because it is virtually impossible to control the dosage. Taking hormone replacements, or some birth control pills, on a long-term basis can result in dependency. If you don't let your body regulate itself, but force it to use unnecessary hormones, your body's own production of estrogen and progesterone will suffer.

So, what is good hormone balance, and how do we get there?

First and most importantly, it is absolutely key to know what your body is doing. Before trying any estrogen or progesterone treatments, or even using birth control or other substances that change your hormone balance, you need to know what your current hormone situation is. It's very easy and inexpensive to conduct a hormone test. Available through either a blood or saliva test, you can find out exactly where you are and what you need to improve. There are resources available online to let you know what the average ranges of estrogen and progesterone are at every stage of the menstrual cycle. For post-menopausal women, one sample is usually enough, though two samples a few days apart are preferable. If dealing with infertility, ideally a test should be conducted every day of your cycle to determine which hormones are out of balance. For most other issues, two or three samples a week apart are enough to determine the extent of any hormone imbalance.

Most of the issues (as well as cancer risk) occur when estrogen levels are too high or progesterone levels are low. After you have determined your hormone imbalance, there are numerous ways to correct this naturally. Your basic health, food and nutrition foundation is where you must start to take control of your hormone balance. Many processed foods and meats contain unhealthy amounts of steroidal hormones and antibiotics. While in the United States only cattle and sheep ranchers are allowed to use hormone treatments, virtually all conventional meat producers use various antibiotics on their poultry or meats. There is mounting evidence that the hormone residue in beef and dairy is responsible in part for increases in the incidence of cancers and the early onset of puberty of girls. Not to mention most hormone-treated beef is 25 percent tougher than their organic counterparts. Most conventional farmers greatly overuse antibiotics on their animals, giving them daily doses of strong medicines (often the same or very similar to ones given humans) in an effort to keep them healthy. The ramifications for humans are still being researched, but drug-resistant microbes are appearing at an alarming rate. When your system is already imbalanced, letting harmful, unnatural substances into your system will only serve to make it worse.

What should you eat? Start off by going organic and limiting your consumption of meats. Even organic meat and poultry will have some residual natural estrogen. Deep sea fish is a great alternative. Many vegetables and legumes contain small amounts of natural estrogen and progesterone. You have most likely heard about soy products. Soy contains phytoestrogens, like isoflavone, which, in significant portions, act as an estrogen supplement. For women (and men) who need more estrogen, eating more soy helps and also reduces the risk of cancer. Foods containing natural progesterone or foods that support the body to produce it efficiently are harder to find, though wild yams (not sweet potatoes or regular yams) reportedly support progesterone production.

For more info, contact Alternative Health Clinic, in Myrtle Beach, 4810 N Kings Hwy, at 843-692-9243, or visit AlternativeHealthClinicMB.com. See ad, page 13.



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