

Ladies, do you cry easily, feel sad or depressed, angry and irritable? Are there times that you are unable to mentally focus? Do you experience headaches, nausea and fatigue? These symptoms may be caused by a hormonal imbalance!



# Whose Side Are You On Anyway?

Staying Afloat in Spite of Your Body's Shifting Hormonal Tides

By Sabina Fasano

Some days, your body is your best friend, with happiness and feelings of well being bubbling up throughout the day. On other days, flat emotions, fat feelings, and general crankiness seem to descend out of nowhere. Whose side is your body really on, anyway?

You can do more than just blame it on hormones. By understanding what's really going on inside, you can begin to neutralize the negative effects of shifting hormonal tides and achieve better emotional and physical balance.

## A Monthly Status Report

Our bodies are up front and honest in their messaging, and as women, hormones are responsible for delivering approximately 480 monthly progress reports during our lives. They let us know how we're doing when it comes to living our lives. For example, if we are grabbing coffee in the morning, a candy bar at lunch, and eating fast food for dinner, we'll soon show it, in our weight, skin, lack of energy and general attitude.

From puberty through menopause, hormone levels shift, and as they do, the body responds with a series of physical, mental, and emotional wake-up calls. How you respond to these wake-up calls affects their power over the rest of your life.

## The Role of Estrogen

You often hear people talk about estrogen as one hormone, but there are three estrogen compounds: *Estradiol*, *Estriol*, and *Estrone*.

Together with the other sex hormones progesterone and testosterone they are involved in keeping us balanced and feeling good. There is no such thing as an independent hormone action; they rely on each other for their proper functions. No *one* hormone precursor and no *one* vitamin, herb or mineral can work alone. They need each other to properly interact with cells, tissues and organs.

From puberty to menopause, our bodies manufacture hormones.

Changes, both unexpected and expected disrupt hormone harmony. Pregnancy, childbirth, PMS, entering perimenopause, menopause, illness and daily stresses are the main contributors for these changes. Also the effects of medications and self destructive behaviors like smoking, and drug/alcohol abuse will change the hormone balance, and keep them from doing their job properly. They will send out symptoms to warn you when your health is in danger. Hot flashes, heartburn, sleepless nights, headaches, moodiness and fatigue are just some of the ways our body works to get our attention. Some people simply ignore symptoms. They convince themselves it is age and normal to feel crummy. Part of it is change as we age, but left unchecked, your hormone imbalance will age you faster than anything else!

### The First Wake-up Call Puberty

Our body design begins at the moment of conception, when cells divide and sex hormones determine whether we will be female or male. Testosterone determines men's development; estrogen determines women's. As women, we are born with one to two million immature eggs, or follicles, in our ovaries. From birth, our ovaries produce estrogen and progesterone in tiny amounts. The ovaries wait until the brain sends a message to increase the concentration of these hormones and launch a girl into puberty, generally around age 11-13.

The starting point is the first menstrual cycle, the actual timing of which is determined by our unique biological clock. The same biological clock that determines the end of our childbearing abilities and brings our periods to an end. Natural menopause usually occurs around age 50-53.

As estrogen concentrations increase, girls experience the predictable teenage growth spurt, and the development of breasts, hips and thighs.

More than 60% of all women also begin suffering from PMS at this time. Symptoms generally begin one to two weeks before her period starts and

abruptly stops with the onset of the menstrual cycle. There are over one hundred symptoms of PMS that are related to hormone imbalance. The most common include:

- ✓ Emotional symptoms such as crying easily, feeling sad or depressed, angry, irritable and unable to mentally focus.
- ✓ Mild to severe cramping-uterine contractions caused by the release of a hormone called prostaglandin within the uterus, as the lining breaks down.
- ✓ Headaches      ✓ Water retention
- ✓ Nausea          ✓ Tender breasts
- ✓ Fatigue          ✓ Bloating

These symptoms are caused by the hormones being out of balance. Sometimes the imbalance will effect insulin and thyroid hormones. If steps are not taken to neutralize hormone highs and lows, PMS will accompany a woman throughout her childbearing years to various degrees. PMS can increase with age or become less or more severe after having children.

If you suffer from PMS, you can help lessen its effects by increasing your level of exercise, losing weight if you are overweight, stopping destructive habits like smoking or taking drugs, and eating a healthy, more natural diet. Women of every age can benefit from associating with positive, supportive friends and pursuing hobbies or activities that satisfy their minds and spirits. Controlling PMS symptoms before reaching peri-menopause is very helpful in making this time a smoother ride.

If you have a daughter, now is the time to set healthy patterns that will help minimize the effects of hormonal swings and help prepare her to mature and age beautifully and healthily. Talk with her openly about developing healthy lifestyle habits. Discuss the risks of sexual activity and discuss options such as abstinence and birth control. Educate her about the serious long-term risks of birth control pills and as-yet unknown risks of new drugs that stop menstrual periods. Support her in making strong friendships with her peers who will support each other's decisions

about important health issues, such as drinking, drugs, and high-risk behavior.

### A Sea of Change Childbearing Years

During pregnancy and birthing, hormones go through an upheaval that can take time to readjust. Women who had PMS before pregnancy are more apt to suffer from post-partum depression for a few days or even weeks. If you do not suffer with PMS, but slip into post-partum depression after the birth of a baby, you are more likely to develop PMS when you begin to cycle again. Women who have children later in life have greater hormonal demands on their body, particularly if they are on the cusp of perimenopause.

Nursing mothers use up energy and calories to replenish their breast milk and the new demands on their body. What you eat becomes even more important because it improves the quality of your milk and helps you rebound faster from pregnancy. Choosing good clean whole food and ingredients is essential. While your baby is sleeping, give yourself time to mentally and physically return to your normal self. If you cut back on physical activity during pregnancy, get back into it slowly. Start walking and stretching and check with your doctor before engaging in workouts that are more strenuous.

### The Change, Not the End Peri-menopause

Peri-menopause is the period of preparation for ending childbearing and the menstrual cycle. As puberty prepares you to begin those phases, peri-menopause prepares you to end them and functions as a bridge to the next phase of your life. Peri-menopause can sneak up on you if you aren't expecting it. It can begin as early as the early 30s and it can last up to thirteen years. It can also be tough on your body, mind, and spirit because this period of life often is stressful enough as you raise a family, manage a career, take care of older parents, or try to balance all three.

What's going on? During peri-menopause, levels of estrogen and progesterone drop. Even the tiny amount of

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testosterone that our ovaries produce for maintaining energy and libido decreases. Declining hormone levels are natural, not a disorder, and simply part of the process. As estrogen levels drop, you will begin experiencing irregular periods, hot flashes, changes in vaginal moisture, sex drive, and possibly continuation or intensified PMS symptoms. Aging is normal, but feeling old is a choice, and using synthetic hormones will not keep you from either one.

Emotionally, peri-menopause is a wake-up call that may cause sadness over the past or lost dreams. On the other hand, it could motivate the planting of new dreams. Many women find themselves in self-discovery mode, looking for change in their lives, relationships, or careers. Children may be increasingly independent, and the approaching end of our childbearing years may be a source of gladness or sadness.

This is a good time to evaluate your health and lifestyle habits. Be sure to continue important regular health screenings for blood pressure, cholesterol, breast cancer (mammograms), and cervical cancer (PAP test). At age 40, it's a good idea to have a bone scan done to establish a baseline for detecting osteoporosis (bone-thinning) early, when it is treatable and reversible. It's a time for planning where you are going next and how you are going to get there. The decisions or changes you make now will significantly impact your vitality and mental clarity for the next 30 or more years of your life.

### Menopause and More

Menopause is medically defined as going one full year without a period. You may experience a number of different symptoms that began in perimenopause and continued or worsened during menopause. The most common ones include:

- ✓ Joint aches and pains
- ✓ Breast tenderness
- ✓ Depression
- ✓ Hot flashes
- ✓ Night Sweats
- ✓ Vaginal Dryness
- ✓ Cramping
- ✓ Nervousness
- ✓ Insomnia
- ✓ Palpitations
- ✓ Headaches

- ✓ Poor concentration
- ✓ Irritability
- ✓ Mood swings
- ✓ Dizziness
- ✓ Low libido
- ✓ Water retention

Look for options that suite your needs and preferences that will balance hormone shifts and reinforce healthy habits. Adjust them as needed, to maintain optimal health through the end of



your life. This is also time to focus on other health issues, such as heart disease and osteoporosis. Although not related to menopause, they tend to show up around the same time. There is no magic pill to dealing with menopause. Feeling better is the result of all the good you do. Since menopause is not a collection of symptoms to be fixed, take good care of yourself, your bones, your heart and your mind by means that promote and build health and good habits instead of resorting to a cocktail of medications.

Control symptoms by supporting your hormonal and immune systems with herbs, vitamins, minerals, wholesome food and exercise. Try healing modalities such as acupuncture, meditation and massage. Stimulating the immune system and balancing body functions, they help you to relax, sleep better, and calm hot flashes without the use of drugs.

### It's Up from Here

Hormonal change can be exasperating or emotionally enriching—the choice is up to you. As our bodies change with each passing stage, we have many new opportunities to gain wisdom, flourish spiritually, and become a powerful force for change and good. In my own experience with menopause, there was enormous change in my life with increased stress. Even though understanding hormones is my life's work, being human, I found myself moving

away from what I know works. I put off my regular commitment to exercise and started eating food I normally would not eat. I told myself I was too busy to take time for myself. Because I was not sleeping, I slipped into my old habit of drinking coffee, and I paid the consequences. Hot flashes and irritability were creeping into my day and night, so I took more herbal supplements and adjusted my progesterone cream thinking this would help. Instead, I felt worse. I knew the only thing that would put my body back on track was to get in balance. I can't stand feeling crummy and having my hormones out of whack was adding to my stress. It was enough to make me stop doing what was hurting me. Within two weeks or so, I was back to my self and better equipped to deal.

Sometimes our days are troublesome and getting things done becomes a challenge. Finding peace can feel like another chore but simple strategies can reduce stress and calm our minds. In the long run, developing your own techniques will serve you well in managing your physical, mental and emotional health and happiness. Meditation comes in many forms. My favorites are taking a walk or light jog and taking a mineral bath with scented oils.

This is your time to smile and laugh more, to have the time to eat meals more slowly, to take slow luxurious baths, and discover new things. Trust yourself and your intuition. Reach out to loved ones and community. When you control the impact of hormonal shifts on your life, you can build a strong personal foundation for moving forward to the next great phase of your wonderful life.

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who can use your ability.