

The Balanced Woman

Balancing Hormones for Physical and Emotional Health

The discovery of hormones was a major advance in medical science. These compounds, secreted by the endocrine glands, enter the blood stream and exert a major influence on the functions of the body. They do this in tiny amounts, parts per million. They control growth, maturation, metabolism, immunity, organ function, moods, stress levels and reproduction. The hormones that make the sexual differences and regulate reproductive function vary in their levels both over the cycle of our life and in smaller cycles during our adult years.

Both women and men go through three distinct stages in life, each controlled by changes in hormonal levels. Prior to puberty, there are enough hormones present to make the basic differences between girls and boys, but not enough to enable reproductive functions.

Puberty—From Child to Adult

Puberty is the first major life transition. It creates both physical and emotional changes in men and women and is often a period of difficulty and confusion for both sexes. Anxiety, irritability, and health problems like teenage acne, can arise from the changing hormone levels associated with puberty.

In women, rising levels of estrogens, the female hormones, transform a girl's body into that of a woman. Under the influence of the male hormone, testosterone, the body of a boy also undergoes the changes that transform him into a man. During this period sexual attraction increases in young men and women, along with the biological changes that make them capable of mating and producing children.

Once this stage has past, we enter the middle or adult stage of life. During this stage there are cyclic variations in hormone levels. These are most readily observed in women, who undergo monthly physical and emotional changes.

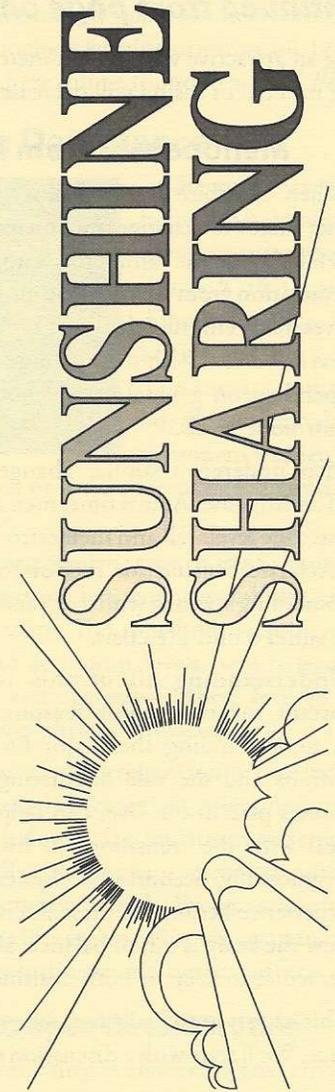
The Adult Female Cycle

This female cycle is lunar in nature. Women living close to nature would menstruate and ovulate at the same time. These cycles would tend to be in sync with the phases of the moon, which is a 28 day cycle. The link between female reproductive cycles and the phases of the moon is why the words moon, month and menses all have the same linguist roots.

Women usually feel better during the first phase of the cycle, which is estrogen dominant. This phase traditionally corresponded to the time of the waxing moon. In the second half of the cycle, which is progesterone-dominant and linked with the waning or decreasing moon, women often experience physical and emotional discomfort. The symptoms vary depending on the specific hormones that are out of balance, but are collectively known as pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS).

Although it hasn't been researched as well as the female cycle, men also appear to have a hormone cycle during their adult years. The male cycle appears to be solar (daily) and not lunar (monthly). Men's testosterone levels tend to be the highest in the morning and lowest in the evening, but also vary more in response to specific stimuli. For instance, winning in sports or

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Your guide to better health the natural way.

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seeing an attractive woman can increase testosterone levels, while being rejected or losing will decrease them.

Menopause: From Adult to Elder

When childbearing years have ended, women go through another major life change, menopause. Fertility is lost as estrogen levels fall, but at the same time testosterone levels in women rise. The transition from being an adult to an elder (or wise woman) involves many emotional, as well as physical changes. The degree of distress associated with these changes is dependent on general health, not just hormone levels.

Men undergo a similar change called andropause. At this time, men's testosterone levels fall and their estrogen levels rise. Sensing this, men often feel something is wrong with them and often suffer a mid-life crisis.

Understanding all of this is important for two major reasons. First, understanding the major life transitions and the role fluctuating hormones play in our lives can help us deal with the transitions of life more gracefully. Second, the physical and emotional imbalances we experience because of these fluctuating hormones can help us see how the body is out of balance, allowing us to apply appropriate remedies to keep us both healthier and emotionally happier.

This issue is specifically focused on keeping female hormones in balance. We'll start with a discussion of the female menstrual cycle.

Understanding the Menstrual Cycle

A healthy menstrual cycle consists of four stages, which can be associated with the phases of the moon. The indicated days for each phase are all based on the average 28 day cycle and count from the first day of menstruation, but the exact days will vary.

Follicular Phase – Estrogen (Waxing Moon)

Starting shortly after menstruation ceases (about day 6) the *follicular* phase of the cycle begins. During this phase, which lasts a little more than a week, the pituitary releases the follicle stimulating hormone (FSH). FSH stimulates the release of estrogen which begins maturing an egg in one of the follicles in the ovaries.

Estrogen is the dominant hormone during this phase of a the menstrual cycle. The word estrogen is formed from combining the latin *estrus* and *gen*. *Estrus* refers to the time a mammal is in heat, which is the time of ovulation, when there is a possibility of conception. *Gen* refers to generation or creation, as in *genesis*. So, the word estrogen literally means the generator of ovulation or sexual desire.

Estrogen doesn't just start preparing an egg for fertilization, however. Physically, it lowers cholesterol, aids bone development

and helps keep the skin soft and healthy. Emotionally, it enhances feelings of femininity and desirability, increasing sexual desire. It also increases emotionally sensitive to others, which encourages social behavior.

Many women feel they are at their best during this phase of the cycle. They may feel more self-confident during this period, too. Just like the waxing moon, which is growing brighter, during this period moods tend to be more positive. It's a good time of the month to be creative and productive.

Ovulation Phase (Full Moon)

Ever wonder why we associate a full moon with romance? It's quite simple, women traditionally became fertile at the time of the full moon. As estrogen levels rise it signals the hypothalamus and pituitary, which now start to produce the luteinizing hormone. A surge of this hormone is what causes the egg to be released.

When the matured follicle releases an egg it can be fertilized to initiate pregnancy. So, the sex drive tends to peak at this time.

If a couple is trying to conceive, they should know peak fertility starts at about the 14th day of the menstrual cycle and continues for several days thereafter. Teenage girls should also be warned that when their sex drive is the highest, it's also the time they are most likely to get pregnant.

Luteal Phase – Progesterone (Waning Moon)

After ovulation, levels of the luteinizing hormone and estrogen start to drop, starting the *luteal* phase. The follicle, which matured the egg, now becomes a miniature gland known as the *corpus luteum*, which starts producing progesterone. This makes progesterone the dominant hormone during the second major phase of the menstrual cycle, which lasts about 14 days as shown in the chart above.

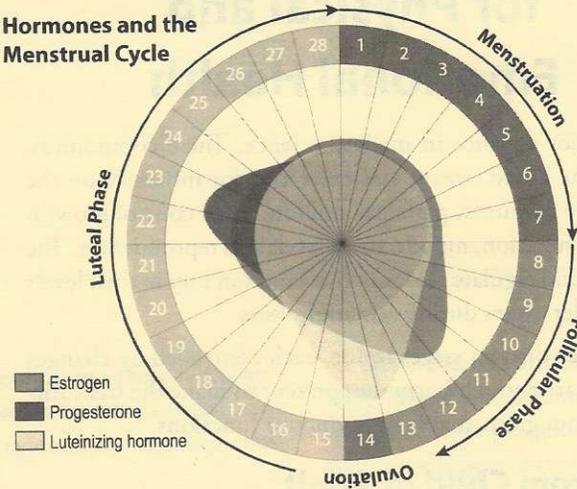
Progesterone prepares the uterine lining for the implantation of a fertilized egg. If the egg is fertilized, progesterone will remain the dominant hormone throughout the pregnancy. If no egg is fertilized, estrogen will start to rise again, kicking off menstruation, where the uterine lining will slough off.

About 10 days before the period is when many women begin to experience the symptoms of PMS. These symptoms can include irritability or depression, fatigue, skin problems like acne or oily skin, cravings for sugar or chocolate, increased pain, breast tenderness, constipation and fluid retention.

Menstruation Phase (New Moon)

In tribal societies, women menstruated during the new moon, when the moon is completely darkened. The artificial world of electric lights and the general disconnect with nature means this rarely happens today, but menstrual cycles will sometimes come into sync when women live together.

Hormones and the Menstrual Cycle



During this time levels of progesterone and estrogen tend to be low, although estrogen levels will begin to rise as menstruation begins. So will levels of prostaglandins. Uterine muscles will contract expelling the inner layer of the uterus.

The hormonal changes during menstruation can cause fatigue, headaches (including migraines), cramping, mood swings, low back pain and tenderness of the skin and breasts. This will usually last for about 4-6 days, at which time the cycle begins again.

In some tribal societies, women left the village during menstruation and gathered at the moon lodge during this period, while men took care of the children. The traditional wisdom of many cultures also recommended abstaining from sexual intercourse during this time. It was generally recognized that women needed some time for self care during this time of the month. It's a time when receiving extra help and support is especially valuable.

Balancing the Hormonal Cycle

PMS is a monthly problem for most women, the symptoms varying from mildly discomforting to incapacitating. Unfortunately many women don't realize that there are steps they can take to minimize it. Long before PMS was acknowledged in the West, it was recognized in China and herbal formulas were created to help ease this monthly cycle.

Chinese Herbs for Women's Health

They recognized that the monthly loss of blood made women prone to blood deficiency. To combat this, millions of Chinese women take herbal formulas containing herbs like dong quai, white peony, ligusticum, rehmannia, atractylodes, ginseng, ganoderma and lycium, all of which can be found in a *Chinese Wood Increasing Formula*, which is designed to build the blood.

A formula like this is helpful for heavy menstruation and anemia due to blood loss. Taken regularly, it can reduce PMS symptoms and even make the transition through menopause easier. Because Chinese women take tonic herbs like these regularly through the adult phase of their life, they typically don't experience the same severe symptoms many Western women experience menopause.

Nutritional Supplements for Hormonal Balance

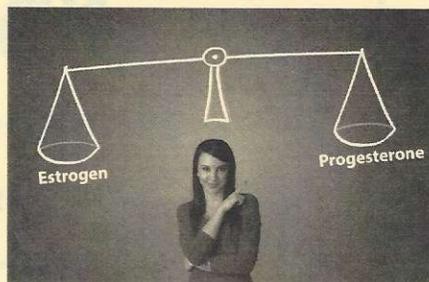
In the West, we've learned that deficiencies of several nutrients also create problems during the menstrual cycle. Magnesium deficiency is common in the West and contributes to menstrual cramps and many PMS symptoms. Chocolate is rich in magnesium which many be one reason women often crave it during the luteal phase of their cycle. Most women need about 200-400 mg. of **magnesium** to reduce their PMS symptoms, but if they suffer from severe cramps, they may need more.

Closely behind magnesium as a PMS reliever is vitamin B6, which is needed in both hormone and neurotransmitter regulation. It helps to stabilize blood sugar levels and mood. Excess estrogen (see below) blocks the action of B6. Adding just one 50 mg. **vitamin B6** tablet per day has been helpful for some women.

A third important deficiency that contributes to PMS is a lack of essential fatty acids. Specifically, oils high in the fatty acid

gama-linoleic acid (GLA) have helped many women with PMS symptoms. Oils high in GLA include evening primrose oil, borage oil and black current oil. All three can be found in a *GLA Blend*.

Estrogen Dominance



Beyond these basic herbs and supplements, there are more specific things that can be done to balance those hormones naturally. The most common hormonal imbalance in modern women is an

excess of estrogen with normal or low progesterone, a condition known as estrogen dominance.

This is the cause of the most prevalent type of PMS, known as PMS Type A, which is characterized by anxiety, irritability, anger, mood swings and nervous tension. Too much estrogen increases adrenaline, noradrenaline and serotonin levels, which leads to feeling more nervous, angry and aggressive. These feelings and emotions are a result of genuine physical imbalances.

Besides PMS Type A, symptoms of estrogen dominance include heavy menstrual bleeding, headaches (especially migraines), panic attacks and an irregular menstrual cycle. Too much estrogen coupled with too little progesterone will cause pregnant women to miscarry and may also cause spotting between periods. Excess estrogen also contributes to health problems like uterine fibroids, ovarian cysts, endometriosis, fibrocystic breast disease and breast cancer.

Xenoestrogens and Estrogen Detoxification

One cause of estrogen dominance is xenoestrogens, environmental chemicals that mimic estrogen. Many pesticides have xenoestrogenic effects and there are also xenoestrogens in soft plastic containers. Chemical estrogens have been fed to animals to increase egg, milk and meat production, resulting in these foods having xenoestrogenic effects. Eating organic foods and avoiding plastic containers, especially with hot food, is a good place to start in avoiding these chemicals.

It also helps to aid the liver's ability to detoxify excess estrogens. **Indole-3 Carbinol** activates metabolic pathways in the liver that break down excess estrogen, including xenoestrogens. It is available as a supplement and is naturally found in cruciferous vegetables like cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower.

An herb that can be helpful for restoring the balance of estrogen and progesterone is chaste tree berries. They help to balance out the monthly cycle when it is irregular, reduce the excess hormones in teenagers that produce acne, and aid hormonal balance during menopause.

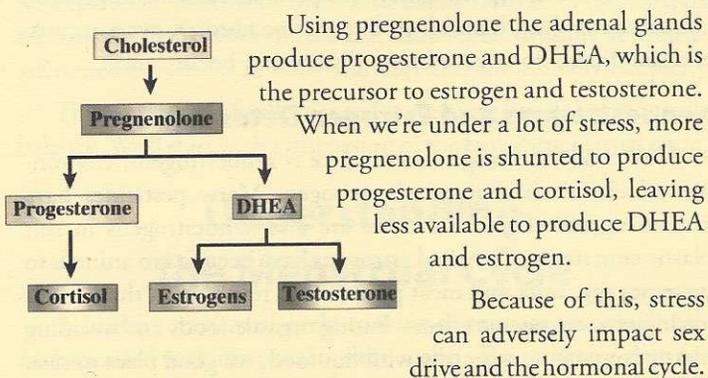
A blend of **wild yam and chase tree** helps restore a proper balance of estrogen and progesterone in estrogen dominance. The combination of chaste tree with sarsaparilla and false unicorn is even more helpful for tipping the balance of excess estrogen back to a more normal hormonal cycle. Combined with herbs that

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reduce bleeding, like yarrow and shepherd's purse these herbs are part of a **Heavy Menstrual Bleeding Formula**, which could also be helpful in reducing the risk of miscarriage and easing symptoms of PMS Type A.

Stress and Hormonal Imbalance



Using traditional adaptogenic and tonic herbs can be helpful in modulating stress levels and restoring hormonal balance. One of the adaptogens that can be particularly helpful here is ashwaganda, which helps balance both thyroid and adrenal function. An **Ashwaganda Adaptagen Formula** containing ashwaganda, rhodiola, and schizandra may be helpful for hormonal imbalance brought on by stress.

Post-Menopause Hormonal Balance

As estrogen levels decline with age, follicles cease releasing eggs and the menstrual cycle stops. Levels of DHEA, progesterone and estrogen fall dramatically. The adrenal glands continue to produce smaller amounts of progesterone and fatty tissue converts some of the DHEA into estrogen. This may be one reason why women often gain extra weight during menopause. It helps their estrogen levels. The adrenal glands also produce small amounts of androstenedione (a form of testosterone).

These changes are not a disease. They are a natural part of life. Many women use hormone replacement therapy to keep levels of estrogen and/or progesterone higher after menopause. While there may be some benefits to this, there are also some drawbacks. Higher levels of estrogen after menopause increase the risk of estrogen dependent cancers, particularly breast cancer.

A safer way to help maintain hormone balance is to focus on overall health and supporting the adrenal glands with herbs and supplements. An **Anti-Stress Vitamin Supplement** with vitamin C, B-complex and other ingredients to aid adrenal function can be helpful. It can also be helpful to take an **Adrenal Glandular** supplement; combining adrenal substance with vitamin C and B vitamins can also be helpful.

Herbs containing phytoestrogens, plant compounds that mimic estrogen, may also be helpful. These include **licorice root** (which also aids adrenal health and blood sugar balance), **hops** (which aids sleep) and **black cohosh** (an herb traditionally used to ease menopausal symptoms). Flax seed lignans, soy and beans in general also provide phytoestrogens that can support health post menopause.

A **Menopausal Support Pack** containing GLA, wild yam and chaste tree, a mineral supplement for bone health and an **Herbal Menopause Formula** containing dong quai, licorice, black cohosh and false unicorn root may be helpful, too.

Additional Help and Information

For more information on balancing female hormones through the monthly cycle and the changes in life, contact the person who gave you this newsletter or check out the following resources:

- The Complete Woman's Herbal* by Anne McIntyre
- Women's Herbs, Women's Health* by Christopher Hobbs and Kathi Keville
- The Herbal Menopause Book* by Amanda McQuade Crawford
- Women's Encyclopedia of Natural Medicine* by Tori Hudson, ND