

Hormones: what you need to know

Dr Erika Schwartz Preventative medicine specialist



“ Sleep at least seven hours and help your body to make hormones

Hormones in balance give us energy and the healthy glow of youth; out of balance, or depleted in middle age, and we feel old and tired. Yet this isn't a foregone conclusion — we have hormone-supporting solutions at all ages.

Forties

Women

Your periods may be changing, yet you can still get pregnant. I often encounter women in their forties with grown children wanting one more baby. That desire comes from hormones sending a message, a last push, to procreate. For most women this decade should be seen as a unique opportunity to prepare for the next phase of life. Your body still makes estradiol, progesterone, testosterone, thyroid and adrenal hormones, which define how you feel and look; but they need a little help now.

We all lose our hormones, and the rest of our lives will follow that loss. This is the decade when you must take control, stop ignoring the facts that your reproductive hormones are dropping and do everything in your power — including sleep, diet, exercise and stress management — to keep your hormones balanced. You must protect yourself from the next stage when you no longer make hormones.

For premenstrual syndrome (PMS) or extended periods, progesterone prescribed by your doctor will help. Take iron, potassium, vitamin B complex and iodine supplements. They are crucial to healthy hormone production, as well as brain and neurological function.

If you are taking birth-control pills, now is the time to swap to a non-hormone option. Birth-control pills and other synthetic hormones (such as Mirena IUD and NuvaRing) suppress our entire hormone-production cycle with the goal to stop ovulation. As a result, women live with low blood levels of hormones — menopausal levels. When you are young this is not a problem, because when you stop taking birth-control pills your body bounces back after a few months and starts making normal levels. As you enter your forties, that is no longer the case. Let your

body make the hormones it's making and support it.

We make hormones when we sleep. Commit to sleeping at least seven hours every night. Reduce alcohol, caffeine, dairy, and fried foods. The older you get, the more you need your body to support hormone function and production, rather than spending energy detoxifying the food and drink you put into it.

Cardio exercise detoxifies your system, and lifting weights raises your metabolic rate and helps the body to clean up toxins. It also increases testosterone, cortisol and endorphin production.

Men

The big fear among men is that their testosterone levels will drop although levels don't drop dramatically in healthy men in their forties. A little change in diet and serious exercise will go a long way. Cutting back on processed foods and heavy meats makes it easier for the metabolic processes to focus on making hormones rather than cleaning up. Eat less fat, more protein, leafy dark-green vegetables, salmon and other fatty fish.

Exercise boosts testosterone production as well as the feelgood hormones such as serotonin, endorphins and cortisol. Sex also boosts testosterone. In fact, people who have regular sex have higher circulating levels of adrenaline, testosterone and serotonin.

Fifties

Women

Your ovaries have stopped making eggs and hormones. The reproduction cycle has ended. Your estradiol, progesterone and testosterone levels are dropping. Thyroid and adrenals follow suit. Forget about labels such as menopause, perimenopause. Instead, focus on becoming the best version of yourself.

There is no getting away from the facts about the impact of the decline in these hormones. This drop will lead to wrinkles, insomnia, mood swings, night sweats, hot flushes, weight gain, loss of libido, and urinary tract infections.

This is a good time to consider natural/bioidentical hormones. These are identical to the estradiol, progesterone and testosterone our bodies make when we are younger. They



are extracted from soy and yam oils and have undergone extensive pharmaceutical processes of concentration and purification to create the hormone molecules our bodies recognise as our own.

Available only on prescription, bioidentical hormones belong under the umbrella of HRT, which also includes hormones that look nothing like your own (norethisterone, conjugated equine oestrogen) and birth control pills that are made in a lab or taken from animals. In my view, if you have access to bioidentical hormones you will do better because your body recognises them as you own.

When it comes to your sex drive, declining hormones are not the only issue in midlife. Do you think you're no longer attractive or do you find him no longer a hunk? Come clean on a personal level before you run seeking hormones, supplements or anything marketed in the area of sex.

Men

Even if you still love your wife, you're probably spending more time on the sofa watching television than chasing her around. That's because you are no longer making the same amount or quality of testosterone that you made a decade ago. Testosterone and thyroid blood levels drop, so this is the decade to consider hormone supplementation. Address your lifestyle. Improve your diet, exercise and sleep. If you feel better, you'll have sex. That will make your hormones flow.

Sixties

Women

Menopause and loss of reproductive hormones are rapidly fading. You'll be left with cortisol, which is good as an anti-inflammatory, but is also a stress hormone; insulin, which controls sugar

levels; serotonin and dopamine, which affect mood; and another few hundred hormones that affect body functions but are not sex hormones. Unless you are taking hormones, you are probably at peace with the fact that wisdom is your strongest suit. Women on hormones in their sixties and seventies will be more likely to look and feel 40. Whether you take them or not is your choice. But do take fish oils and curcumin, which are anti-inflammatories.

Now is also a good time to focus on an alkaline diet. Our body gets acidic as we age, eat junk, drink and lose our hormones. The more acidic we are, the more inflammation occurs and the more diseases of ageing start. To combat acidity we want to increase body alkalinity which is the ultimate anti-inflammatory. Limit citrus, tomatoes, spicy foods and increase spring water, water with lemon and camomile tea. They will help. Try eating smaller portions. The less you eat and the fewer toxins you have in your body, the more efficient your metabolic processes are.

Men

At this stage you are likely to have low testosterone, and you may find it hard to talk about. Feeling inadequate and turning to alcohol and the TV is not the solution. Your life expectancy is a further two decades, so don't give up now. Consider taking testosterone supplements, but you may need to add Viagra or Cialis. I have patients in their seventies who have sex three times a week. Testosterone and Viagra might be part of the picture, but they sure enjoy life.

It's all about enjoying every moment, every stage with gusto. That's why we have hormones anyway.

Dr Erika Schwartz (drerika.com) is author of *Don't Let your Doctor Kill You* (Post Hill Press, £16.99)

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