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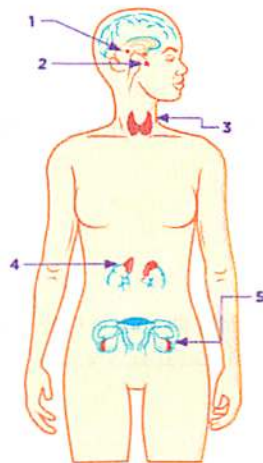


Illustration: Todd Detwiler

By Dr. Mehmet Oz

I think of the body's hormones as musical instruments in an orchestra: Each plays its own part in creating a perfect concert--until the day one is out of tune and throws off the entire melody.

Although it was many years ago, I still remember one of the first patients I saw with a hormonal disturbance. She was a lovely woman in her early 40s who was a little heavy; despite having tried every diet under the sun, she couldn't seem to shed the extra pounds. As we talked and she mentioned a few more of her concerns--dry skin, brittle hair, a lack of energy (even shortly after her morning coffee)--I realized I needed to test her thyroid levels. Sure enough, they were too low. With proper medication, my patient's skin and energy improved, and she was no longer a prisoner to a simple chemical imbalance.

No one should have to live with an untreated [hormone](#) problem. Some require medical care, while others may be addressed with lifestyle adjustments, but almost all are treatable. Here is a guide to some of the most common signs of hormone imbalance--and what you can do to restore harmony.

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Estrogen

The Clues

If you are overweight, you may have elevated estrogen levels; fat cells actually produce the hormone, so extra weight can lead to too much estrogen in the body. This can be a serious problem because excess estrogen can fuel breast and uterine cancers. During menopause, on the other hand, all women experience a natural drop in estrogen levels, along with side effects that range from hot flashes to headaches to joint pain.

What You Can Do

I know I sound like a broken record, but if you carry extra pounds, exercising and watching your diet are essential: Losing weight can improve your estrogen balance and simultaneously reduce your risk of cancer. (An overweight or obese postmenopausal woman who loses just 5 percent of her weight could potentially cut her risk of breast cancer by up to 50 percent.) I also suggest that women with too much estrogen avoid foods that are high in phytoestrogens (plant compounds that mimic the hormone), such as whole soy products.

For women going through menopause, there is some evidence that herbal supplements such as hops and black cohosh may help alleviate symptoms. But if the symptoms interfere with your daily life, talk to your doctor to see if [hormone replacement therapy](#) is right for you.

Testosterone

The Clues

In the years preceding menopause, a woman may suffer from decreased [testosterone](#) as her ovaries and adrenal glands slow the production of sex hormones. This may explain why many women experience a drop in libido during this period of their lives. Excess testosterone, however, may be the result of a condition called polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS); possible symptoms include irregular periods, male-pattern baldness, a deepening voice, and excess body hair.

What You Can Do

If you're concerned about low libido, try incorporating more zinc-rich foods—like oysters and sesame seeds—into your diet (zinc appears to be linked to an increase in testosterone levels), and ask your doctor about testosterone supplementation. To treat PCOS, your doctor might recommend taking birth control pills containing synthetic hormones that reduce the production of testosterone. It's also important to avoid refined sugars and other carbohydrates in your diet (insulin resistance is linked to a boost in testosterone production) and to eat more fiber (which counteracts blood sugar spikes and promotes the excretion of excess sugars from the body).

Melatonin

The Clues

Low levels of melatonin, the [hormone](#) responsible for maintaining the body's circadian rhythm, are associated with poor sleep and depression. Our bodies may produce less melatonin as we age, which could explain why some older adults have more trouble sleeping than children do.

What You Can Do

If you struggle to get enough shut-eye, try taking .5 milligram of a melatonin supplement one to two hours before bedtime. I'd also suggest drinking melatonin-rich tart cherry juice: In a pilot 2010 study published in the *Journal of Medicinal Food*, subjects who drank two cups a day experienced some relief from insomnia.

Ghrelin and Leptin

The Clues

Stomach growling? Thank ghrelin. Produced in the stomach, ghrelin cues the brain that you're hungry. After you eat, leptin swoops in to tell the brain you're full. If these two hormones fall out of sync, you may lose the ability to recognize when your body is satiated and overeat as a result.

What You Can Do

Try your best to get a full night's sleep: A Stanford University study found that habitual sleep restriction (five hours a night as opposed to eight) raised a person's ghrelin levels by nearly 15 percent, lowered leptin levels by 15.5 percent, and was directly associated with increased body weight. Other research has shown that exercise and stress reduction may help keep ghrelin levels in check.

Thyroid Hormone

The Clues

[Thyroid hormone](#) regulates how fast you burn calories. One in ten women doesn't produce enough of it—a condition known as hypothyroidism, which can lead to weight gain, depression, and fatigue. On the other end of the spectrum is hyperthyroidism, in which the thyroid gland releases too much of its [hormone](#), causing symptoms such as anxiety, a racing heart, excessive sweating, even diarrhea.

What You Can Do

If you have hypothyroidism, a daily thyroid hormone replacement pill can help correct the imbalance. You might also want to consider eating more onion. This veggie contains kaempferol, a compound that may kick-start production of the hormone. If you have an overactive thyroid, your doctor may prescribe one of several treatments, from radioactive iodine—to slow hormone production—to surgical removal of the gland; most patients respond well once they get the proper care.

Aldosterone

The Clues

Aldosterone regulates your body's sodium-to-water ratio. But a condition called renal artery stenosis—a narrowing of the blood vessels that supply the kidneys—can trigger the release of the hormone, causing a surge in blood pressure.

What you can do

A heart-friendly lifestyle that keeps your blood vessels healthy can also be a kidney-friendly lifestyle. Minimize salt intake, follow a low-fat diet, get some exercise, and don't smoke.

Cortisol

The Clues

When you're under pressure, your cortisol spikes to provide the body with a quick dose of energy. Chronic stress, however, can keep your cortisol elevated continuously--a dangerous state, since the hormone can suppress the immune system and has been linked to the accumulation of abdominal fat.

What You Can Do

When I'm stressed, I close my eyes and breathe deeply for two to three minutes with one hand on my chest and the other on my belly; my chest stays still while my abdomen rises and falls. As you calm down, your cortisol should drop to normal levels.

The Hormone Factory

A brief tour of your body's finely tuned endocrine system

1. Pineal Gland

Named for its pinecone shape, the pineal gland is tucked between the two hemispheres of the brain. It's still a bit of a mystery, though we know it produces the sleep hormone, melatonin.

2. Pituitary Gland

Known as the master gland, this pea-size organ releases hormones that stimulate the other glands to, in turn, release their hormones.

3. Thyroid Gland

Think of this gland as the thermostat for your metabolism: It can increase or decrease the rate of calorie burn by releasing more or less [thyroid hormone](#).

4. Adrenal Glands

Perched atop your kidneys, these glands secrete hormones that control your "fight or flight" response to stress (cortisol and adrenaline) and your blood pressure (aldosterone), among others.

5. Ovaries

These organs produce more than eggs; they manufacture and release the most important hormones for female development: estrogen, progesterone, and--yes--testosterone.

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