

Local

Hormonal imbalance can be corrected

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HORMONE balance is a topic on the minds of many women as they transition through perimenopause to menopause.

Navigating this journey can be akin to walking a tightrope, manoeuvring across a foreign territory under perilous and sometimes scary conditions.



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Even before this time of life, which occurs most commonly from ages 40 through 60, hormone production can start to decline and result in symptoms that are often overlooked, or brushed aside as stress, depression or "the way it is."

In females, the primary producers of hormones are the ovaries, resulting in fluctuating levels of estradiol and progesterone that drive the menstrual cycle.

However, one can't focus on reproductive organs alone when considering the impacts of these major hormones. Levels of progesterone that are too low relative to estrogen can result in symptoms of mood swings, tearfulness, breast tenderness and headaches. Long-term, these hormones are critical for bone strength, mental acuity, heart health and even the skin's youthful appearance.

To complicate matters, the adrenal gland also plays a role in hormone balance -- more than one might think for a small triangular gland that sits atop each kidney. It helps us cope with life by producing stress hormones, from cortisol and adrenaline to DHEA.

Simply and unmistakably, stress affects hormones; both their production and function. For example, the body can undergo "cortisol steal" when under stress. Here, it turns progesterone into more cortisol. This can cause progesterone insufficiency and exacerbate hot flashes, sleep disturbance and anxiety in menopause. High cortisol can also increase estrogen -- depositing fat tissue around the waist -- while decreasing DHEA and with it, the energy and motivation needed to exercise.

Hormones function like a symphony. Each hormone must play its part. Any person struggling with hormone imbalance will hear the melody -- or sad song -- loud and clear. And as health-care practitioners, we have to tune in to more than the horns or the bass; we need to hear the whole orchestra.

If you are noticing irregular periods, changes in mood or ability to cope, you may already suspect that your hormones are fluctuating. You may have already visited your primary health-care practitioner. You may have even been told that everything's fine. After all, your lab results are "normal."

In a health-care system that is structured to treat the disease and overt symptoms (a stark difference from preventing disease and optimizing your health), many can, unfortunately, end up feeling frustrated. You may feel lost in the cacophony of a symptom-masking circus, like an elephant being electrically prodded to perform while carrying a heavy load. As a health-care practitioner who's had many women come to my office in tears (and as a lifelong animal lover), I'm here to tell you: that is not OK.

Your balance is off and your tightrope may be wavering. The sooner you and your healthcare practitioner realize that, the sooner you can get the safety net in place and focus on restoring your balance. Once you know someone is listening, you may not need a safety net anyway. You'll have your eyes on the prize and the next exciting steps ahead.

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