The Hormonal Big Five as far as women are concerned are oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone, thyroid hormones and cortisol. But it isn’t just about sex and moods: we have close to 100 hormones that control everything we do, from how well our brains work to our weight, metabolism, sleep and energy levels. Bottom line? They’re the boss of us. Respect them.

Peak Week, most women would agree, is the second week of your cycle and it lasts between five to seven days (100% Peak You is usually around Day 10). You’re just styling in that week: your primary sex hormones (oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone) are as balanced as they ever will be, and all seems right with the world. This is probably a good time to make all the important decisions, like whether to have that third child, blow your bonus on Bitcoin or give up pizza forever, but it’s also definitely the best time to get your hormone levels measured. And this you must do – preferably before you turn 35. Why? So that your future hormone levels can be measured against that baseline and adjusted accordingly, when the time comes for you… Peak Week forever? Sign us up.

The thing about Peak Week is that it lasts… a week. And then it’s all downhill from there: hormone levels are generally low in the first week of your menstrual cycle and high in the last two. In Week Three, you feel just a tad less balanced and sharp in all respects – other than your tongue, perhaps: oestrogen is high, and if your progesterone is not high enough, you may find yourself feeling a bit on edge.

In Week Four (the week before your period), you just feel heavy – of mood, body and spirit. If you’re lucky, and your high progesterone lasts, you may not really suffer from PMS, but as you get older, you may. That’s when you need to remember that it wasn’t always like this – and doesn’t need to be now.

In Week One, your period arrives, your body starts shedding and almost instantly you feel a sense of lightness and relief, which just gets better and better as your body starts gearing up for Peak Week again. And so it continues…

A user’s guide to the Big Five, and a 5-point action plan.

By Suzy Brokensha
with thanks to Dr Martin Galy

London-based Dr Martin Galy has specialised in bio-identical hormone treatments (BHRT) for both men and women for over a decade. He runs his clinic, 23MD, with other like-minded specialists focused on maintaining health and wellness and restoring natural beauty.
Here’s how to recognise a hormonal imbalance:

If you’re…

• prone to night sweats
• not interested in sex

• finding it difficult to sleep
• putting on weight

• anxious and depressed
• aching joints

• feeling short of breath
• listless and unmotivated

If you’re…

• having trouble remembering things
• having trouble sleeping

• you may be short of testosterone.

If you’re…

• bloated and sluggish
• dissatisfied or hungry more often

• putting on weight (you may also feel ‘swollen’ or bloated),
• feeling short of breath

• having trouble remembering things
• feeling short of breath

If you’re…

• feeling short of breath
• your cholesterol levels may be too high

• feeling short of breath
• feeling short of breath

If you’re…

• you may be short of oestrogen.

If oestrogen is your lovely best friend and progesterone your protector, testosterone is the party girl who can lead you astray – but she’s hands-down the most exciting friend you’ve got. You feel confident, gloriously sexual, razor-sharp, super-energetic, emotionally strong and totally up for anything – because, like Donald Trump, you are sublimely untroubled by self-doubt. Sleep? Who needs it anyway? You’re optimistic and powerful, your memory is on point, your neurotransmitters are firing… no wonder men wonder the testosterone market for so long! Interestingly, far from being ‘the male hormone’, testosterone is essential for women – it’s the hormone from which all our oestrogen is made (we convert most of our testosterone into oestrogen), so in an odd way it’s what gives us our femininity. It also maintains our bone density, along with muscle mass, strength and stamina.

Vitamin D (the sunshine vitamin) is actually a hormone, and it isn’t just a nice-to-have: you really, really need it, because it keeps the rest of your hormones happy and functioning as they should. The bad news is, many of us are dangerously short of it, even us South Africans: it’s like a lifetime spent running around outside may not be enough! So get your vitamin D levels checked, and take a supplement if you need to.

How your hormones are are totally linked to what you eat. Firstly, hormones depend on fat to get around your body, so eating enough healthy fat is essential. Step away from all those fat-free pseudo-foods! Secondly, your gut flora really affect how your hormones behave: a happy gut makes a happy hormone. So eat to please your gut: real food, not too much dairy (or any at all, if you can’t tolerate it), nor too many grains, because they can agitate your gut. Add in fermented foods like sauerkraut, kefir, kimchi and kombucha where you can.

Cortisol, aka ‘the stress hormone’, unsurprisingly responds to stress: it floods your blood with glucose to fuel your muscles to get you the hell out of whatever danger you’re in. All very well when you’re facing down a dinosaur, because your body uses all that energy to run away and then re-balances itself. But if you’re sitting at your desk reacting to your ex-husband’s Facebook post, the energy isn’t used up – and your balance isn’t restored. Which is pretty much how most of us spend our lives: constantly on alert. It has a knock-on effect, too: if your cortisol levels are either too high or too low, it could affect all of your other hormones.

If your cortisol levels are too high, your blood pressure will spike, as will the glucose in your blood, and your cholesterol – and over time all this can lead to insulin resistance and metabolic syndrome; often the last stop before Type 2 diabetes or a stroke, among other nasties. Too much cortisol weakens your bones, restricts collagen production (not good for that firm, dewy skin) and increases inflammation, which is problematic on a number of levels. It also messes with your immune system. It is very important and you’ve got a good thing to have too much cortisol. Let’s leave it at that.

Too little cortisol? You’ll start retaining weight, specially around your middle. You may feel tired and weak and you may have heart palpitations, headaches, very sensitive skin or pain in your lower back. You’ll lack confidence socially and, oddly enough, start craving salty foods (these are actual symptoms, ladies!). Not just how everyone feels at a cocktail party.

Without enough of the thyroid hormones (T3 and T4) you’re tired, you can’t think straight, your metabolism slows down, your hair and skin are dry and you always seem to be cold. If your body uses all that energy to run away and then re-balances itself. But if you’re sitting at your desk reacting to your ex-husband’s Facebook post, the energy isn’t used up – and your balance isn’t restored. Which is pretty much how most of us spend our lives: constantly on alert. It has a knock-on effect, too: if your cortisol levels are either too high or too low, it could affect all of your other hormones.

Feel stressed is not a badge of honour, it’s a death wish. Leaving your hormones to wither away through menopause is NOT a good idea. We know everyone says this, but it’s true: you need to do everything you can to reduce your stress levels. Walk. Sleep. Get off social media. Don’t compare your life to anyone else’s. Don’t drink too much alcohol or coffee. Spend time with people you love.