

your HORMONES – who knew?

By **Suzy Brokensha**
with thanks to Dr Martin Galy

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

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 base line 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,

OUR EXPERT



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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...



Here's how to recognise a hormonal imbalance:

If you're...

- prone to night sweats
- anxious and depressed
- battling to sleep
- foggy-brained; having trouble remembering things
- not at all interested in sex
- totally dried up – from your skin to your vagina
- getting yeast infections
- experiencing heart palpitations and shortness of breath

... you may be short of **oestrogen**.

If you're...

- bloated and sluggish
- retaining water
- putting on weight
- finding it difficult to sleep
- not interested in sex
- prone to night sweats
- experiencing heavy, painful periods that last a long time

... you may be short of **progesterone**.

If you're...

- lacking in self-confidence
- finding it hard to concentrate
- listless and unmotivated
- exhausted and forgetful
- experiencing back pain and aching joints
- losing lean body mass
- not interested in sex

... you may be short of **testosterone**.

When your **oestrogen** levels are just right, and supported with just the right progesterone level... *aaaaaaah*: You feel happy, sexy, well-slept and understood. That's Peak Week – always remember that feeling. You can concentrate, remember everything and you've got the energy to do what needs to be done. Your skin is glowing (oestrogen improves collagen and elasticity), your vagina is lubricated, you are libidinous and your body temperature doesn't suddenly up and attack you when you least expect it. Plus, behind the scenes oestrogen is working away to maintain your bone density and reduce your risk of heart disease and colon cancer... all good. That hormone is on your side.

Progesterone is your loyal backbone: the friend who quietly beavers away making your life easier by overcoming the hurdles of high oestrogen on your behalf. Without it, the dreaded PMS returns. It affects your wellbeing – and crucially, your sleep: when the levels are just right, progesterone is a natural antidepressant, it protects you against breast disease, uterine disease and blood clots, it regulates your body temperature, converts fat to energy and is a natural diuretic. And while it's doing all that, it also maintains your cortisol levels (drumroll: the stress hormone), looks after your uterus and keeps the levels of your good cholesterol up where they should be. Progesterone is the protector hormone: not very exciting, but without it, you're toast.

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 cornered the testosterone market for so long! Interestingly, far from

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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 turns out that 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 happy your hormones are is 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 embrace a life without cheese), not 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 rebalances 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 great 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 much not 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** (T4 and T3) you're tired, you can't think straight, your metabolism slows down, your hair and skin are dry and you always seem to have cold hands and feet. You may have trouble falling pregnant. As if that's not bad enough, you're also putting on weight (you may also feel 'swollen' or bloated), your cholesterol levels may be too high and you may be more prone to seemingly unrelated things like carpal tunnel syndrome or tendonitis.

If you feel sweaty and anxious, often have the shakes and are losing weight, **your thyroid might be over-active**. You could also be hungry more often and feel nervous and restless and have a higher than normal pulse rate. Some people also have itchy skin for no apparent reason, and their eyes may start to bulge slightly. You may also feel dizzy and have trouble sleeping.

THE 5-POINT ACTION PLAN

1 Get your vitamin D levels checked right now, and take a good supplement if you need to.

2 Eat real food: healthy fat, fresh veg and nuts, some fruit, little dairy, few grains, free-range meat (not as the focal point of your meal) and fermented food where you can.

3 Exercise regularly, but not too much.

4 Have your oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone levels checked, preferably in Peak Week – to use as a baseline measure in future.

5 Look after your thyroid! Eat good food (see point 2), making sure you get enough natural iodine (in seaweeds, eggs, cranberries and iodised salt), calcium and sodium. If you're worried about your thyroid, ask your doctor to test your T4, free T4 and T3 levels.

Feeling 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. ♣

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