

The H word

IT'S TIME TO BREAK THE TABOO ON TALKING ABOUT HORMONES. **JO DUNBAR** SPEAKS TO THE EXPERTS ABOUT HOW TO MAINTAIN YOUR HORMONAL HEALTH SO THAT YOU CAN LIVE LIFE ON FULL POWER.

We can't see them, but the importance of our hormones can't be underestimated when it comes to our general health and wellbeing.

Much is said about the menopause and the time before it — the perimenopause — but even once we come through the menopause, fluctuating hormones may continue to have an influence over us. Hormones can affect a whole range of conditions from cardiovascular health to bone density, sleep and our ability to concentrate.

For many women the post-menopausal stage can be liberating: you're free of menopausal symptoms, may feel more energetic and, of course, you no longer have periods to think about. But we need to be aware that, thanks to hormonal changes that occur, our bodies can sometimes respond differently. The absence or drop in particular hormones can bring their own health issues, and there are a variety of conditions which may now become more of a pressing concern.

OESTROGEN AND OSTEOPOROSIS

Levels of the hormone oestrogen drop as a woman experiences the menopause and this has several major health implications. Oestrogen guards against weakening bones so a woman's bone density declines from menopause onwards, making fractures and breaks more of a risk. It is possible to maintain bone density with regular, weight-bearing exercise such as walking and dancing. Calcium in your diet will also help: leafy greens, nuts and seeds and plenty of dairy including yogurt, semi-skimmed milk and hard cheese will help. Phytoestrogens or plant oestrogens are natural chemicals found in food which behave in a similar way to the hormone found in our bodies. Soya milk and other soya products, tofu and seeds including linseed, sesame, sunflower and pumpkin all contain these natural chemicals and can also help.

As well as regulating a woman's menstrual cycle, oestrogen also can offer some protection to the body's cardiovascular system and additionally can keep cholesterol levels in check. After the menopause, these safety measures are less present thanks to the gradual drop in oestrogen. There is a greater risk of heart disease and of developing circulatory issues such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol, which can lead to greater chances of a stroke. Given the elevated health risks post-menopause, it's wise to overhaul an unhealthy diet and ensure you're eating plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and fewer foods high in saturated fat.

BEWARE OF EXCESS STRESS

Symptoms associated with menopause, such as hot flushes and insomnia, are well known, but recent research has found that these issues can return if women become stressed. A new study by University College London, published earlier this year, discovered that stressful events could spike levels of the hormone cortisol and increase menopausal symptoms by 21%. Of course, becoming less stressed is easier said than done — especially if you are experiencing bereavement, relationship issues, an empty nest or work worries. One coping strategy suggested by experts is adopting mindfulness techniques, which include breathing exercises and yoga.

DIABETES RISK

While many women blame the menopause for a thicker waistline, it's not as simple as that. The hormone changes which the menopause prompts don't automatically mean instant weight gain. However, research undertaken by the North American Menopause Society suggests the menopause can prompt fat to be redistributed around the stomach, meaning more women change from a pear shape to an apple shape. Carrying excess weight around your middle means an elevated risk of type 2 diabetes and also coronary disease.

Portion control, eating whole grains and minimising sweet treats will help, as well as drinking less alcohol. Increasing omega-3 through oily fish and walnuts is beneficial. Becoming more active is key, too. Regular exercise will increase muscle mass, which will help your body to burn calories more effectively. »



DEMENTIA AND DIRECT SUNLIGHT

While we are told often about the benefits of sunlight to boost our Vitamin D levels, along with taking a daily supplement, a new study by The University of Bergen in Norway warns against too much time in UV light for post-menopausal women. The research showed that exposing skin to direct sunlight for extended periods of time could cause already low oestrogen levels to decline even further, adding to women's risks of developing neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer's.

The scientists who undertook the study recommend wearing sun cream if you intend to spend longer than 15 minutes out in the sun.

FEELING DRY

Diminishing oestrogen is accompanied by falling collagen levels, resulting in dryer skin. For facial skin, this can be helped by milder cleanser and richer day and night creams. For your skin and hair, a diet with plenty of vitamin C — from fruit and veg — can aid this. Reduced collagen can also lead to issues elsewhere in your body such as vaginal skin thinning, which can be responsible for painful sex and uncomfortable bladder and vaginal symptoms. While a degree of dryness is to be expected as you get older, pain should always be investigated with a visit your GP. Symptoms can sometimes be eased with short-term HRT, applied topically.



TESTING YOUR IMBALANCE

A simple blood test can check your hormone levels, and can be carried out by your nurse or GP with ease. Some require you to fast beforehand, while others don't. Within your hormone check your levels of estrogen, testosterone, and cortisol will be checked, alongside your thyroid function.

CORTISOL

High levels of this can adversely affect bone density, as well as impacting your responses to psychobiological load. High levels can affect memory, sleep, diet, how we deal with life challenges and, of course, general stress levels. Testosterone works in harmony with cortisol, with the former reducing levels of the latter. Meditation can really help reduce stress.

“Talking to other women has made such a difference.”



SARAH CALE (54) FROM BIRMINGHAM RUNS POSITIVE MENOPAUSE, A BLOG WITH HEALTH AND WELLNESS ADVICE FOR MENOPAUSAL WOMEN.

“I’m definitely more in tune with my body now. A few years ago I struggled with anxiety and had to take control. After lots of research I ended up taking HRT. I was fortunate to be able to do so — not all women can. I researched how our hormones and midlife affects us on a day to

day basis, physically and mentally. Going through the menopause is a bit like being on a voyage of self-discovery, but for a lot of women it can be very tough. Talking to other women, having communities of women going through the same thing, makes a difference. The Wellbeing Of Women charity has been very helpful.

I run, lift weights and train; that helps me massively. I try to encourage other women to do things that make them feel positive. I’m still learning that I need to be more compassionate to myself. We need to say *I feel tired, I need to go to bed early*. It doesn’t matter how old you are, the menopause doesn’t mean your life stops. It can be the start.”

positive-menopause.com



“This is the time to future-proof your health.”

DR HANNAH SHORT, A GP AND MENOPAUSE SPECIALIST, SHARES HER ADVICE ON HOW TO OFFSET HEALTH ISSUES POST-MENOPAUSE.

“Whether or not you have ongoing symptoms, everyone will have an increased risk of heart disease, dementia and osteoporosis following the menopause. This is an important time to take stock, future-proof your health and make positive choices. There is research showing that diet and exercise choices can make a big difference, and I see that in my clinics.

“Every woman is different; some women will have problems like hot flushes, vaginal dryness or joint pain every day because of the lack of oestrogen and they might need medical treatment. If you haven’t established an exercise regime, it’s a good time to start. Being active every day is important, but we also need to get our heart rate up a few times a week.

“Diet has a real impact on health, and a fibre-rich diet is important. Complex carbs and wholegrains are actually very healthy. Not smoking is super-important, and a lot of women don’t realise how much of an impact alcohol can have. A small glass of wine can keep menopausal symptoms ongoing because alcohol is an endocrine disruptor [meaning it can disrupt hormone levels].”

drhannahshort.co.uk

Vaginal dryness affects **over half** of post-menopausal women. (Women’s Health Concern)

The **average age** to hit the menopause is **51**

On average, women spend **a third** of their life post-menopausal. (Newson Health)

Women can lose up to **20%** of **bone density** during the first **5-7 years after menopause**. (NHS)





WHAT ABOUT HRT?

Long associated with helping to ease menopausal symptoms, HRT can also alleviate some post-menopausal health conditions or ongoing symptoms such as vaginal dryness, night sweats and hot flushes. It can also help guard against osteoporosis. There are over 50 types of HRT available. A spokesperson from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists explains, “Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is the most commonly prescribed treatment for menopausal symptoms, but this form of therapy is not suitable for some women, such as those with a history of breast cancer. HRT helps to relieve symptoms by replacing oestrogen levels that fall during the menopause transition. You can take it as tablets or through a patch, gel or spray on your skin. If HRT is suitable for you and you are interested, your GP should discuss the benefits and risks with you, both in the short term and the future.” More information can be found at thebms.org.uk or womens-health-concern.org

TV presenter Gabby Logan has recently spoken out on her use of bioidentical hormone replacement therapy. According to the NHS, bioidentical hormones are made from plant sources that are believed to be similar or identical to human hormones. While practitioners may claim these hormones are a natural and safer alternative to standard HRT medicines, they’re not widely recommended as they aren’t regulated for use in the UK.

THE PANDEMIC SHORTAGE: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Alongside the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a distressing consequence for many women as supplies of HRT dwindled, with some products becoming unavailable. Pharmacies reported stock shortages, leaving them owing a backlog of prescriptions to patients.

Government and manufacturing decisions are said by many to be to blame, as many pharmaceutical companies ceased production of hormone replacement therapy medication in order to re-direct their resources at designing drugs to treat Covid-19.

Brexit is also being held responsible for shortages, as ingredients to make HRT products became harder to source from Europe. There’s also an argument to suggest demand for HRT has exceeded supply and manufacturers have been caught short by consumer expectation.

Official medical bodies such as the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the British Menopause Society and the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare have been reminding the public that while supply chain issues continue, alternative HRT products are available. Women are advised to discuss their situations with their GP, via telephone consultation if in-person appointments are not possible.

What about other hormones?

GHRELIN (OR LENOMORELIN)

Produced by the enteroendocrine cells in the gastrointestinal tract, especially the stomach, with small amounts also released by the small intestine, pancreas and brain, this is known as the ‘hunger hormone’ by professionals. Your blood levels will be at their highest just before you eat, returning to lower levels after meals and low-fat food, rich in protein, at every meal can reduce levels and help to regulate your appetite and boost positive fat storage.

TESTOSTERONE

Although commonly associated with males, females still produce this to maintain normal metabolic function, muscle and bone strength, urogenital health, mood and cognitive function. It also contributes to your libido, increasing dopamine levels in the central nervous system. As we age though, our systems may become flooded, resulting in conditions such as hirsutism, polycystic ovary syndrome and congenital adrenal hyperplasia (a group of genetic disorders affecting the adrenal glands). Medication can help to manage levels. Research indicates that slightly higher levels of testosterone among older women may possibly indicate lower risk for some diseases, though further investigation is needed.

PROGESTERONE

Noticing a shift in mood is usually due to a drop in progesterone, which starts to naturally decline in all females from 30 onwards. You might feel anxious, nervous, suffer migraines and notice weight gain.

Older women can benefit from taking progesterone via creams or tablets to help thin the uterine lining, which can in turn help prevent endometrial cancer. It can also treat abnormal uterine bleeding associated with hormonal imbalance and thinning hair. ■