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Weighing up Your Hormones

Statistics show that almost 62 per cent of adult Australians are now overweight, and experts now believe unbalanced hormones may be a major contributor. As Sarah Gawthorne discovers, everyday food can be used as medicine to balance the body's hormonal system, leading to weight loss and improved health.

The word "hormone" comes from a Greek derivative that means "to spur on". It's funny then, that the new wave of thinking says to achieve better health, we must give our hormones a kickstart. The stress of modern day living is constantly playing havoc with our hormones, but getting them to work at their optimum might not be as complicated as we think.

In basic terms, hormones travel through our blood stream and act as messengers between our cells and glands. They carry out many different functions in various organs but ultimately try to maintain a chemical balance in our bodies that keeps us healthy. It's easy to lump "hormones" all into the same category. However, the reality is that we all have hundreds of known hormones operating in our bodies at any given time, and they're all responsible for different things.

"The hormonal systems in the body interact on many levels, and imbalances that aren't addressed can affect different areas of the body, leading to a variety of physical symptoms," Sara Canney, resident naturopath at Sydney's Alkaline Health Spa, explains.

"Women often struggle with the physical symptoms associated with a hormonal imbalance such as hair loss or excess hair growth – usually facial or on the arms, PMS, hot flushes, menstrual problems and fibrocystic breasts."

THE IMPORTANCE OF HORMONAL HEALTH

Looking after hormonal health should be a priority for all of us, as an imbalance can lead to a host of health concerns. In the past, symptoms of hormonal imbalances were often attributed to the ageing process or lifestyle factors. However, we now know that the underlying cause is often an imbalance in our hormones, which comes about as a result of inflammation.

"Inflammation is an imbalance in the immune system that can affect the way hormones work in the body if it is prolonged and untreated," Dr Michael Elstein, physician and board member

of the Australasian Academy of Anti-Ageing Medicine, explains.

The symptoms of hormonal imbalances are varied and are dependent on the individual. However, as hormones influence the brain's chemicals, symptoms such as poor concentration, lack of focus, lack of energy, poor short and long-term memory, anxiety, insomnia and even depression can indicate a hormone imbalance. Other common symptoms include mood swings, fertility problems, hypoglycaemia, intolerance to the cold, and poor skin condition.

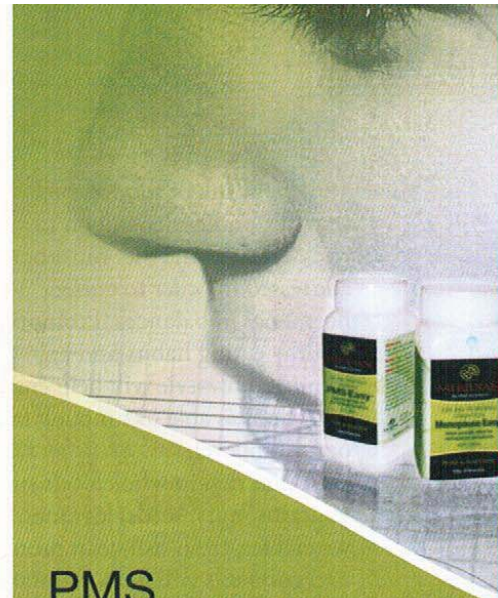
Both men and women can experience difficulty losing weight or sudden weight gain as a result of an imbalance in their hormones. Yet, once aware of the imbalance, changes in diet and an improved lifestyle can lead to increased energy levels and improved overall health.

WEIGHTY ISSUES

More than 25 years ago, US-based Dr Rami Cohen developed a program that used food as medicine to correct hormone imbalances in the body, ultimately leading to significant, healthy weight loss. In his studies, Dr Cohen found the hormones insulin, serotonin and human growth hormone were out of balance in people with a weight problem.

The body's need for insulin can be reduced by altering your diet, in particular by eliminating highly refined carbohydrates such as breads, pasta, chocolate and sweets.

Rosemary Burd, principal of Cohen's Lifestyle Clinic in Australia, says the program is personalised depending on the individual's results. Combinations of foods are chosen to stimulate the pituitary gland to produce higher levels of human growth hormone and control the release of insulin.



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If we think of food as fuel that our bodies depend on to run correctly, the diet must be addressed in order to correct hormonal imbalances. Promoting healthy eating habits and an improved lifestyle will help ensure your body is able to function at its optimum level.

A diet rich in wholefoods such as grains, nuts, seeds, legumes, vegetables, fresh fish, lean protein and good oils will help maintain good health and assist the body with hormone regulation.

THE MAGIC HORMONE

Human growth hormone is considered the superman of hormones in anti-ageing circles. "Human growth hormone promotes muscle growth which can increase the body's metabolism and lead to sustained weight loss," Dr Elstein says. "While human growth hormone can lead to initial kilogram gains on the scales due to increased muscle mass, the metabolic increases will lead to long-term, sustained fat loss."

Diet, exercise and sleep patterns all play a role in the secretion of this important hormone. Avoiding caffeine, alcohol, sugars and processed foods is important. Also, experts recommend getting sufficient sleep every night, as the largest surge of human growth hormone happens soon after our head hits the pillow.

REGULATING YOUR INSULIN

Insulin regulates blood sugar levels. Insulin resistance, common among overweight people, is a precursor to diabetes.

"Insulin resistance makes burning fat harder for the body," Dr Elstein says.

"Although insulin resistance is not the primary cause of weight gain, it can prevent weight loss as it gets in the way of the fat burning process, thus making losing weight more difficult."

The body's need for insulin can be reduced by altering your diet,

in particular by eliminating highly refined carbohydrates such as breads, pasta, chocolate and sweets.

INCREASE YOUR SEROTONIN LEVELS

Serotonin controls food cravings and improves mood, happiness and sleep.

"Serotonin helps people to feel fuller, thus when serotonin is stimulated, it helps people to eat less," Dr Elstein says.

B vitamins, in particular B6, are needed for serotonin production, so including a daily supplement of a vitamin B complex is important. Essential fatty acids, in particular omega 3, support serotonin production, so using a quality EFA blend and increasing your intake of fish, soya beans, walnuts and oils such as flaxseed oil will help. Vitamin D, absorbed from sunlight or found in oily fish, cod liver oil and eggs, has been shown to help increase serotonin. Vitamin D supplementation in the winter can be of vast benefit. Other supplements that have been found to help increase serotonin levels include calcium, magnesium, zinc and vitamin C.

Tryptophan, an essential amino acid that is a precursor to serotonin, should also be consumed. You'll find it in chicken, turkey, beef, fish, eggs and cheese, among other foods.

DECREASE YOUR CORTISOL

Cortisol is a hormone released by the adrenal gland in response to either physical or emotional stress. When levels of cortisol are elevated, typical in today's stressful lifestyle, one stores fat and risks increase in diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and a weakened immune system.

According to naturopath Sara Canney, vitamin B5 and magnesium are essential in decreasing this stress hormone.

"Vitamin B5 works specifically to assist with healthy adrenal function and stress response and can be found in avocado, beans, green vegetables, mushrooms, egg yolk, milk and wholegrains," she says.

"Magnesium is also needed to feed and calm the nervous system, so your diet should include foods such as millet, green leafy vegetables, muesli, almonds, cashews and legumes." **NH**

Want more information?

For Sydney's Alkaline Health Spa, visit www.alkaline.com.au and for more information on the Australasian Academy of Anti-Ageing Medicine, visit www.a5m.net

For information regarding Dr Cohen's lifestyle program visit www.cohens.com.au

