Overcoming Hormonal Disorders

Part I: Women’s Health
PMS and Menopausal problems

[Part 2: Men’s Health will be presented in our next issue]

TOXICITY
Toxins are substances that are poisonous to the processes that maintain life. We know we are toxic when our skin breaks out in pimples, we have terrible body odour or we are so irritable and moody that we scream at everyone around us. Toxins can disrupt the hormonal balance by:
- the liver not functioning properly - because it must break down the hormones,
- constipation - hormones are not excreted via the bowel,
- heavy metals from cigarettes and amalgam fillings in our teeth; potent synthetic hormones (xenoestrogens) from foods, for example, hormonally-fed-animal meats; plastics; and household cleaning products,
- industrial wastes - as demonstrated by the enormous environmental clean-up that was needed at Homebush Bay due to the hormone-mimicking chemical, dioxin.

INSULIN
When sugars and refined carbohydrates are eaten, such as white bread, chocolate and cakes, the pancreas (the organ that controls blood sugar levels) goes into overload, secreting excessive amounts of insulin. This produces insulin resistance in which the cells don’t respond to insulin any more, and sugar can no longer get into the cells to be used to make hormones, regulate hormones or be used for energy production. Insulin resistance also causes other hormonal disruptions, such as high levels of circulating androgens and decreased levels of sex hormone – binding globulin (SHBG), both of which further disrupt our hormones.

NUTRITION
This is fundamental to all aspects of health. The body needs certain nutrients to make the hormones, while the balance of other nutrients affects how the hormones act in the cells, such as regulating the balance of calcium to magnesium inside the cells. The liver needs certain nutrients to break down hormones. The digestive system plays a role in oestrogen excretion, by requiring adequate fibre to keep the bowels regular. If there is constipation, the oestrogens are reabsorbed back into the bloodstream.

Looking at these four factors – toxins, stress, insulin and nutrition – it is obvious that hormones do not work in isolation. We can address all four factors ourselves to make a substantial impact on our hormonal health. This discussion (Part I) deals with hormonal disruption in regard to premenstrual syndrome (PMS) and menopausal problems, while Part II will cover benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH) in men.

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PMS: Premenstrual Syndrome

Most people have heard of the dreaded PMS (or PMT) that even husbands and boyfriends pick up on before a period! More than three-quarters of women suffer from some form of PMS, occurring cyclically each month 7 - 10 days prior to their period. It is characterized by irritability, depression, anxiety, headaches, breast swelling and pain, sugar and chocolate cravings and acne. There are over 150 recorded symptoms of PMS.

When treating my clients, I ask them to keep a menstrual symptom diary showing when they experience their PMS symptoms (for example, 3 days before a period), what particular symptoms they experience (for example, irritability, pimples) and how severe they are, so that we can see exactly what we are dealing with, the progress and any triggers.

With PMS there is a relative excess of oestrogen, or there may be not enough progesterone to balance the oestrogen as these two hormones work together to regulate our fertility and menstrual cycles. This imbalance occurs via the four causes mentioned earlier – toxins, stress, insulin and sugars, and nutrition. Compared to symptom-free women, PMS patients have been found to consume 62% more refined carbohydrates, 275% more refined sugar, 79% more dairy products, 78% more sodium, 53% less iron, 77% less manganese and 52% less zinc.

TREATMENT

Diet is the foundation of good health so treatment must always start here for all PMS conditions.

• Eat small regular meals: preferably 5 small meals a day to maintain even blood sugar levels and energy levels.

• Reduce sugars and refined carbohydrates, including sweets, white flour products, honey, dried fruit, soft drinks, alcohol and fruit juice, all of which cause excessive insulin secretion.

• Eat protein every meal to balance blood sugar levels and increase the liver’s detoxification of oestrogen, namely, beans, legumes, nuts, dairy and eggs (or the non-vegetarian protein foods, fish and organic, hormone-free chicken and lean red meat). Favour vegetables as these discourage harmful gut bacteria that produce the enzyme, B-glucuronidase, which causes oestrogen to be reabsorbed into the bloodstream, instead of being excreted via the bowel.

• Avoid foods that cause inflammation: fried foods, animal fats, sugars, alcohol, margarine, white flour products and the caffeine in coffee, chocolate, cola drinks and guarana.

• Eat more anti-inflammatory foods which contain essential fatty acids – also called omega-3 and omega-6 oils – which are used to make hormones, decrease inflammation and provide for cell-to-cell communication. These include cold water oily fish, such as cod, salmon, mackerel, sardines, herring or trout 4 times a week, a handful of walnuts and sunflower seeds daily, 1 tablespoon of ground flaxseeds daily on cereal or in a smoothie or 1/4 avocado each day.

• Eat phytoestrogen foods which have a weak (200 times weaker) amphotic effect on oestrogen receptors on bodily cells in that they regulate the amount of oestrogen entering the cells. If there is too much oestrogen already, phytoestrogens block the more powerful synthetic oestrogens, and if too little, they add to them. These are called Selective Oestrogen Receptor Modifiers, examples of which are GM-free soy products, beans and other legumes, seeds, alfalfa, mung bean sprouts and whole grains.
In terms of herbs, chaste tree is specific for PMS. Chaste tree (Vitex agnus-castus) corrects the relative deficiency of progesterone, enhances the function of the corpus luteum, inhibits prolactin and helps reduce lumpy, ropey breasts. It is best taken between 6 am and 9 am each day when the pituitary gland is most active.

The most important nutrients for PMS are magnesium and vitamin B6. Magnesium reduces sugar and chocolate cravings as it is needed to bind insulin to cell receptors so that sugar can enter the cells and be used for energy. Magnesium also alleviates cramps, headaches and fluid retention and balances mood swings because it is required for dopamine production, the feel-good hormone, and relaxes the muscles of the body. Recommended dosage is usually 400 mg per day, unless under the supervision of a practitioner.

Vitamin B6 has been shown to improve the depression and anxiety that are associated with the oral contraceptive pill and alleviates fluid retention and swollen breasts, as well as being necessary for normal function of the pituitary gland, the mother of all hormonal glands. 100 mg per day is a safe dose that should not be exceeded – unless supervised by a practitioner – due to the possibility of neurotoxicity indicated by pins and needles and numbness.

LIFESTYLE RECOMMENDATIONS

Perhaps our lifestyle is having a detrimental effect on our body as we rush to keep up with hectic schedules. Making time for exercise is very important for increasing circulation to the reproductive organs including the ovaries that produce oestrogen and progesterone, reducing excess body fat, as an outlet for bottled-up stress and for a feeling of wellbeing! Believe it or not, 50% of Australians don’t do enough exercise. Most people drive everywhere and sit much of the day at computers and desks. It can be difficult to find the time to exercise, so it is important to choose an exercise that you enjoy. Then you will be motivated to do it. It could be swimming, walking, yoga or dancing. Even a physical activity like sex is exercise! Longer duration moderate exercise is best – one hour 3 or 4 times per week – rather than strenuous exercise for less time.

Another essential factor when treating PMS is to reduce stress. This may be achieved by having an emotional outlet for built-up tensions, such as playing sport, screaming into a pillow, having counselling, as well as relaxing the mind and body through meditation, massage or listening to relaxing music in a hot bath – or even letting your creative juices flow by putting your passions and emotions into art, gardening, cooking, dancing, singing or writing.

Avoiding exposure to environmental toxins plays a vital role in PMS treatment. Simple measures to achieve this include eating organic foods, filtering your water, using environmentally-friendly cleaning products as they are usually more human-friendly too, wearing a mask and gloves when using toxic chemicals at work, and reducing exposure to all forms of radiation, including mobile phones that have been shown to disrupt hormonal communication pathways. Keep them switched off when not in use, otherwise they still emit radiation.

Perhaps allow yourself to be a little unreasonable throughout your cycle, rather than relying on menstruation to restore this useful quality to your life! Express the cranky, bitchy, mean parts of yourself in less threatening ways, such as role play or kick-boxing classes! Question whether you are taking on too much and therefore preventing others from doing their fair share. You may be blaming others unnecessarily for not taking on more responsibility. Remember, life is about balance. Put some fun and play back into the simple things in your life!

What do we do when the periods stop coming at all or lose their regular cycles?

Menopause

The mid-life changes of women are seen as synonymous with ageing and disease. However, I like to view these transitional years as marking the beginning of the second half of a woman’s life (or at least a third of her life), often a time of self-empowerment and certainly a natural process (not a disease) that can be a rewarding experience and a positive event in a woman’s life.

Menopause is when periods stop or become irregular as a result of decreasing function of the ovaries. It is usually a retrospective diagnosis, made when there has been no period for a year. Natural menopause occurs on average between 48 and 53 years of age. As the ovaries age, they gradually cease producing their hormones. These transitional months or years are called the climacteric or perimenopausal stage. Symptoms include the well-known hot flushes and night sweats, low libido, vaginal dryness, insomnia and depression.

The same four fundamental causes of hormonal disruption apply to menopause as well: stress, nutrition, insulin and toxins. In particular, years of chronic stress exhaust the adrenal glands, which must take over oestrogen production from the declining ovaries. If the adrenals are already exhausted, they become overloaded, causing night sweats. Menopausal symptoms are also related to body size. Lean, undernourished women have less oestrogen produced in their fatty tissues, so there is less of it to buffer the declining ovaries. As a result, these women suffer more menopausal symptoms. However, obesity causes insulin resistance, which also disrupts the hormonal balance. It’s all about a balance of weight and avoiding extremes. Furthermore, symptoms have been shown to worsen with heavy use of drugs or tobacco.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT DECLINING HORMONES?

Like PMS, the treatment of menopause always starts with diet, and the recommendations are similar:

- Eat small regular meals: 3 main meals and 2 snacks each day.
- Avoid foods that cause inflammation in the body and contribute to symptoms like hot flushes. Such foods include animal fats, sugars, alcohol, margarine, caffeine and white flour products.
- Eat some protein every meal to help stabilise blood sugar levels and increase liver detoxification. Preferably select vegetarian protein as it attracts less of the harmful gut bacteria which cause oestrogens to be reabsorbed into the bloodstream.
- Eat some phytoestrogen foods daily: up to 100 gm/day in total of tofu, tempeh, miso, well-cooked legumes and beans, linseeds/flaxseeds (1 tbsp daily) - grind flaxseeds and keep in the fridge in an airtight jar for no more than a week), sesame seeds, sunflower seeds, alfalfa, mung bean sprouts, wholegrains.

HOW DO PHYTOESTROGENS WORK?

As explained earlier, phytoestrogens buffer the sudden decline in oestrogen levels. Unlike hormone replacement therapy, which is up to 300 times stronger, phytoestrogens give you most of the benefits of HRT without the risks.

The safest recommendation is to achieve phytoestrogen intake through diet and whole-food supplements, rather than using isolated, high-dose isoflavone supplements. Research has shown that whole foods give better results and are more consistent with the traditional Asian diet.
A WORD ON SOYA...

When buying soya products, there are a few things to look for. Buy a product that is non-genetically-modified (GM-free), uses whole soy beans in the ingredient list and has a low aluminium content (soya beans are washed in aluminium vats before processing, so many soya milks have residue contamination). Remember soya is not for everyone as some people have allergies to it – for example, people with blood type A tend to tolerate it better than those with blood type O, and soya milk contains phytaotes that inhibit absorption of minerals such as iron, calcium and zinc. Traditional soya products are best: tofu and the fermented products tempeh and miso. Certainly, Japanese people don’t grow up on soya versions of milk, cheese, yoghurt or ice cream in Japan!

SPECIFIC MENOPAUSAL SYMPTOMS

Hot flushes & sweating
These are due to the oestrogen decline, to lutenizing hormone surges in response to the decline, and indirectly to exhausted adrenal glands that cannot adequately take over the role of hormone production from the ovaries.
Sage is a wonderful herb specifically for flushes; a popular home remedy is to chop 6 fresh sage leaves, soak them overnight in lemon juice, strain and drink the juice for 7 - 10 days. This will usually control flushing and sweating as well as improve digestion and concentration, although it should not be continued for longer than 2 weeks. Two other beneficial Chinese herbs that are widely available in Australia are astragalus and ziziphus.
Obviously, it is important to avoid hot spicy foods, extremely hot temperature foods and drinks, stimulants such as alcohol and caffeine, anxiety and emotional upsets which can all trigger hot flushes. Vitamins C, B6 and B2 nourish the exhausted adrenal glands as well.

Vaginal, skin and eye dryness
Black cohosh is the herb that works best, and there have been a number of open and double-blind trials in Germany to verify its traditional use for alleviating these symptoms. Simply opening a vitamin E capsule and applying it locally to the vagina is effective. Vitamin E is the most important vitamin for menopause and older women in general, as it is highly antioxidant, repairs mucous membranes, improves hormone production and circulation, and decreases dryness, hot flushes and depression. It is claimed by some to be the ‘anti-ageing’ vitamin. However, if there is high blood pressure, start with a low dose of 200 IU/day.

Fluid retention
Both celery and parsley work well, either juiced or in salads. If symptoms are severe, the juice will be the more effective of the two. Or try dandelion leaf tea which is available at most health food stores.

Depression & anxiety
St John’s wort (Hypericum) is widely used in Europe. It is prescribed by doctors in Germany and has been the subject of many scientific studies. It helps restore the integrity of the nervous system, calms anxiety, and is anti-depressant. However, it cannot be taken with heart medication, other anti-depressant drugs (SSRIs) or HIV medication.
Additionally, oats is specific for depression and anxiety as it nourishes the nervous system. Even having rolled oat porridge or muesli for breakfast will make a difference.
Poor memory/concentration
Ginkgo and rosemary both increase circulation to the brain and our extremities and are therefore great for memory as well as low libido.

Low Libido
To increase sexual desire and drive, we need to strengthen the circulation to the genital organs and pelvic region with exercise, ginger and chillies in cooking, and Ginkgo as mentioned above. However, it is often essential to decrease fatigue, exhaustion and stress, while increasing stamina and energy so that we actually feel like having sex! Licorice is a wonderful herb to do this as well as the Chinese ginsengs (but not if you have high blood pressure). There are some traditionally reputed aphrodisiac herbs, although it is important firstly to deal with the underlying issues. The herb, Tribulus, has been thoroughly researched, and studies have shown that it safely boosts testosterone levels and libido in both men and women. A new herb on the market is horny goat weed. However, the research has not been promising so far, yet it has been successfully marketed simply due to its name.

LIFESTYLE RECOMMENDATIONS
In terms of lifestyle, the following will help reduce symptoms:

• wear layers of light, loose-fitting clothing made from natural fibres that can be easily removed;
• avoid overheating the body by extremely hot baths or saunas;
• balance your weight so that you are neither underweight nor overweight;
• try relaxation techniques such as meditation, yoga, massage, breathing, aromatherapy;
• remember pelvic floor exercises to avoid incontinence in which the collagen fibres slacken due to the oestrogen decline: do 50 a day and no one will even know you are doing them.
• moderate weight-bearing exercise (not swimming) maintains bone density, strengthens the heart and improves mood: do 1 hour 3 times a week.

A vital question to ask yourself during this perimenopausal time is, what is out of balance in your life to cause these symptoms? How do you feel about going through menopause? Are there fears of ageing, growing old or having no purpose?
Do you still have a career that you enjoy? Maybe your children have grown up and left. Or is it a time to revalue and reassess your life and see it as the beginning of a new stage filled with opportunities?
Certainly, it is a time in which the body is producing new-found energy, perhaps only needing to be channeled into a new hobby or pursuit, rather than have it work against you. Often it is a time to put your needs and desires first, maybe to fulfill a dream or ambition that you haven’t previously had an opportunity to do, taking advantage of your years of life experiences and wisdom.

ORTHODOX MEDICAL TREATMENT
Any discussion of menopause is incomplete without addressing the increasingly common and controversial use of hormone replacement therapy (HRT).

• Why is it prescribed? To relieve hot flushes or vaginal dryness, or where there is an increased risk of osteoporosis or cardiovascular disease. However, some doctors prescribe HRT for any symptom of menopause, and Australian women are among the highest users in the world.

Breast cancer risk increased by 60-85% among women who were long-term users of HRT, regardless of whether they took oestrogen only or oestrogen and progesterone together (JAMA 2002; 287:734-41).

Increased risk of ovarian cancer, gallbladder disease and dry eye syndrome was also reported in this study.

Endometrial cancer risk increased significantly when oestrogen was given without progesterone and when the uterus was still intact (no hysterectomy) (Lancet, Vol 349, 1997:458-61).

Bone density is increased by oestrogen, but the type of bone developed is chalky and fibrous, and once HRT is stopped, any positive effect is lost within a few years. In other words, you need to continue HRT forever to prevent osteoporosis (Lancet, Vol 343, 1994:654-657).

Heart disease risk was initially thought to be decreased because oestrogen reduces LDL cholesterol and increases HDL cholesterol. However, progesterone nullifies these effects and it has now been found that some types of progesterones (noretinosterone) have negative effects on blood lipids. A study (JAMA 2002; 287:734-41) found that HRT worsens existing heart disease and increases the risk of blood clots.

There are also many documented side-effects of HRT, including worsened asthma, increased insulin resistance, fluid retention, weight gain, high blood pressure, kidney stones, migraines, varicose veins, genital bleeding, brittle bones, reflux, and the list goes on.

Some specific contra-indications where HRT should definitely not be administered are: diabetes, hypertension, high blood lipids, epilepsy, fibroids, migraines, gallbladder disease, multiple sclerosis, liver disease, thyroid disease when on medication, if smoking, if at risk of breast cancer, or if there is any history of blood clots or deep-vein thrombosis.

• Progesterone, testosterone, DHEA and cortisol are not found in any herb or plant at biologically active levels. Therefore, if a product claims to contain “natural” progesterone or other hormones, or claims to increase these hormones, then it must be laboratory synthesized or be derived from horses’ or pigs’ urine, which is exactly the same as HRT or the oral contraceptive pill, differing only in dosage.

• “There must be some good things about hormone replacement therapy,” said Dr Zerr, “but I’m not sure what they are right now.” (JAMA 2002; 287:734-41).

In view of these recent research findings, the use of HRT in perimenopausal and menopausal women does seem to be unsubstantiated, particularly when there are safer, effective, genuinely natural alternatives. However, relying on any magic bullet, whether medication or ‘green’, cannot replace good nutrition and healthy living, along with addressing the underlying lifestyle, environmental and emotional causes.

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