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HORMONES: IT'S TIME TO PUT YOUR MONEY WHERE YOUR MOUTH IS

Mood, hunger, sex, sleep... Hormones influence far more than you think. And as the wellness industry becomes more bespoke, hormonal health is the latest frontier. Hannah Nathanson gets a taste for this new era of medicine

Hormones make good headlines: 'Can't park the car? Blame your hormones!', 'Want to buy sexy clothes? It might be in your hormones'. It's part of the reason I've always known that hormones can dictate your mood but had never given much thought to how my own might be affecting my health. It's also why, when it comes to hormonal health, two moments in a woman's life stand out: PMT and menopause. Cue another shouty headline: 'Our house of horrid hormones: A mother on the nightmare of going through menopause while her teenage daughter hits puberty'.

But hormone health is far more nuanced than such hyperbolic headlines would have you think. To get the sciency bit out of the way, hormones are the body's chemical messengers produced by glands; they trigger activity in different parts of the body and regulate the function of cells and organs. There are sex hormones, hunger hormones, love hormones, happy hormones and stress hormones (among others). If these are out of whack, they could cause any number of modern-day ailments, from insomnia to burnout and bloating. And, as I'm slowly learning, balance is key.

According to Dr Sohère Roked, a hormone specialist who sees a range of symptoms in patients, including exhaustion, fertility issues and weight gain, 'Hormones are really the foundations to your body. If your hormones aren't right, it doesn't matter what you're doing with your diet and lifestyle, because your foundations are shaky. So if we can get the foundations right, everything can flow much better.'

As a health-conscious person who has guzzled down the green juice Kool-Aid and lives by the mantra that what you put into your body 100% affects what you get out of it, I realise that I am spectacularly unaware of my own hormones. Up until now, I haven't properly acknowledged that, as a 31-year-old woman on the pill, my body is making absolutely none of its own oestrogen and progesterone (the two main female sex hormones). I've been on the pill for 10 years and I'm beginning to notice changes in my body and my mood that I don't feel in control of.

Of course, age plays a big part. It's only since turning 30 that I started noticing changes (weight gain around my middle and mood swings that make my boyfriend hide in the pub). 'Naturally, our hormones start to decline from about 27 onwards,' Dr Roked tells me when I go to see her for a consultation at Omniya, a health clinic in Knightsbridge. No wonder studies show that 27 is the age of the quarter-life crisis.

'When you ask women when they felt at their prime, most will say their late twenties,' Dr Roked explains. 'Then, suddenly, they're like, "Oh God, I'm 30 now, I can't drink as much, I need to exercise more..."'. For men, the age at which their hormones start to decrease is later, but Dr Roked emphasises that women in their early twenties can still suffer terribly from hormonal health. 'It is more complicated in women: too much progesterone and you feel moody, sluggish and tired, but if you have too little, you feel the same as well – it's about getting the optimum level.'

Dr Roked had sown the seed: I immediately want to find my optimum level, so, after a blood test to measure my testosterone (important for women's mood, sex drive and muscle strength), I leave with an adrenal stress kit. Adrenals are glands that sit above your kidneys and produce

the stress hormone cortisol, which is the hormone linked to the body's fight-or-flight response. Last year, a nutritionist 'loosely' diagnosed me with adrenal fatigue – when your adrenal glands are functioning below their optimum level and causing symptoms such as tiredness and an inability to handle stress – but I never did a test for it. The kit consists of four saliva collection tubes (gulp) and some very complicated instructions. I'm both intrigued and terrified of what the test results will reveal. Do I really want to know?

Hormonal health is a growing area of medicine and part of the wellness trend for much more bespoke treatments and therapies, not just a one-size-fits-all solution. According to Dr Amalia Annaradnam, who co-founded The London Hormone Clinic and prescribes bio-identical hormone replacement therapy (using body-identical hormones made from living organisms, such as Mexican yams, to restore balance), 'It's a new era of medicine. There will be more coming out on hormones over the next year or two because it's such a big topic.' Dr Roked, who also offers genetic testing to determine how your health is affected by your DNA blueprint, agrees: 'You can get your cheek swab done and find out the best diet for your body. You can also see how your body metabolises hormones, so you can use this information to your advantage. You might need to take supplements to promote or handle your hormone production.' She's not too concerned that, at a cost of £900, taking one of these tests isn't exactly available to the masses, 'In 10 years' time, it's not going to be so expensive – everybody will be getting it done. Personalised healthcare is going to be the way forward.'

After an evening deciphering the adrenal kit instructions, I wake up at 6am the next day to prepare myself for the first sample (one hour after waking and after no food or drink other than water). Spitting into a vial is far from glamorous, but finding a freezer at work to conserve the samples proves much more difficult. Eventually, I find one on the executive floor and post the samples to the lab at the end of the day. As I wait for >

my results, I start to research other areas of health that are linked to hormones and learn that nutrition – and in particular gut health – is huge.

According to nutritional therapist Eve Kalinik, 95% of serotonin, the key hormone that affects your mood, is produced in your gut. 'The gut is involved in many hormonally related conditions that might be felt very far from the gut itself,' she tells me. 'We often think of thyroid hormones as being in the thyroid gland, but in fact 20% of our thyroid hormones get converted in the gut, which has a massive impact on our metabolism.' Eve has dedicated an entire chapter to hormones in her recently published book *Be Good to Your Gut*, which explores how supporting the gut, and all the trillions of microorganisms in it, can help achieve a 'happy hormonal balance'.

I ask whether there are any superfoods that help hormone health. 'Brassicas, such as broccoli, cauliflower and kale. Broccoli is a pin-up for health foods, but with good reason. These foods contain a compound that helps the body to metabolise oestrogen.' But Kalinik is quick to stress that you can't just rely on adding broccoli to your diet. 'You need to have a healthy gut to get the benefits from it. Avocados are a really good stress food as they contain good levels of the pantothenic acid our adrenals need, but it only works to a point.'

So my diet could help me manage my stress levels, but I need to make sure I eat in a calmer environment and not at my desk. 'If you shut your laptop and don't eat with your work around you, it's amazing how much better you feel. It even affects things like your hunger levels,' says Kalinik. 'Often, we wolf down our food and still find ourselves hungry, or we need a coffee. We just haven't allowed enough time for our hunger hormones to kick in and tell us we've had enough.'

But there are ways to influence your hunger hormones that don't involve food. Sleep is one of them, as is the time of day you exercise. Eve suggests working out first thing in the morning, as 'this can help to support glucose tolerance for better and more balanced blood-sugar management'. When it comes to exercise, the trend for HIIT classes and squeezing an intense session into 20 minutes isn't necessarily helping our hormone balance. Everyone I speak to name checks yoga as the best way to minimise stress. According to Dr Annaradnam, 'the people who need to do yoga most are the people who say, "Oh, I can't relax in a yoga class, I can't switch off." That's why you need to do it! If you can't switch off for an hour, that's a problem.'

Which is how I find myself switching off with one of the most switched-on yoga teachers I've ever met. An ex-drug addict and alcoholic, Carolyn Cowan has been a kundalini yoga teacher for 20 years and is fascinated by hormones. 'Do you want a dopamine hit?' she asks during our session at Chelsea's Triyoga, where she'll be running a workshop on how yoga can rebalance your hormones in November. I say yes, obviously, and then follow her into a cross-legged seated pose that involves stretching up, letting my head fall, inhaling and opening my mouth wide while sticking my tongue out as far out as I can. I feel stupid, but then I get the hit. 'A large number of dopamine receptors are in the mouth, which is why eating comforts us,' she says as I release my arms and giggle at my light-headed buzz.

* ADAPTOGENS

These plant supplements, including ashwagandha, maca and ginseng, help balance hormone levels. Find adaptogens in the I AM blends range by Naomi's Kitchen.

* BROCCOLI AND MUSTARD POWDER

Boost broccoli's powers by pairing it with mustard powder. Nutritionist Eve Kalinik suggests adding to vinaigrette and drizzling over broccoli.



HORMONE HACKS:

How to get back in balance

* THE RABBIT POSE

Like child's pose but with arms stretched back to hold the soles of your feet and with your chin tucked into your chest. It helps you feel balanced by stimulating the thyroid gland.

* OHHHHHHM

Skip the chanting in your yoga class? You could be missing out. Chanting stimulates the meridian points on the roof of your mouth and helps trigger serotonin and dopamine.

Central to Cowan's practice is our ability to 'land in the present, where you're not guarded, not pretending, not worried – you're still.' Through a series of gentle postures, breathing and stretching, Carolyn shows me how to do just this. She explains that when people come into her classes, their bodies are filled with adrenaline, testosterone and cortisol. What she does is try to allow people to tune in, balance themselves and stimulate happy hormones such as dopamine and serotonin, our body's natural antidepressants that 'eat' our stress hormones.

I like the idea of my stress hormones being eaten and, thinking back to the adrenal test I took and the pending results, I want to find more ways to achieve this state of calm and switch off for an hour. It turns out that one of the best ways is through sound therapy. As a committed yogi, hormone yoga didn't seem too alien, but

a sound bath might be a step too far into hippy-dippy-dom. I speak to sound therapist Louise Shiels before one of her sessions and she assures me: 'I get a lot of people who have never tried it before and they are converted every time.' I am one of those people.

Sound therapy works by inducing calm brain waves that put your body in repair mode. 'We're normally in beta

mode – the active mind. When we slow down we go into alpha, and we go into theta brain waves when we are drifting off to sleep. When these are activated, the parasympathetic nervous system is switched on, which is responsible for controlling all the body's systems.' During the hour-long session in a whitewashed studio in east London, we lie under blankets while Louise plays the gongs.

At one point I open my eyes to see what's going on, and it's like an intense game of sleeping lions – everyone is completely still and very zen. There's a crescendo towards the end before Louise plays chimes to break the gong frequencies and we're brought back to earth. It's one of the best hours I've spent all week and makes me feel calm about the test results – which I've been unduly anxious about.

It turns out I could do with a lot more gong baths in my life. Dr Roked tells me my cortisol levels are elevated in three out of the four samples,

and off the scale in the morning: 'High cortisol levels cannot be sustained and are often a precursor to adrenal fatigue,' the result sheet says. So my 'loose' diagnosis last year wasn't completely unfounded. In contrast, my testosterone levels are low, which Dr Roked explains could be due to the pill and high cortisol levels. 'To treat this, it's good to find the cause and resolve it. Doing things like intermittent fasting, strength training and making sure your diet has good levels of fat and protein are going to help your

body make testosterone, which is very important for women – it gives you a bit of spark and get up and go.'

It takes a while for it all to sink in, but I decide not to get stressed about being officially stressed and something clicks. I'm much more in control, especially of lifestyle factors, than I think I am. Dr Roked suggests stress-busting supplements called adaptogens, which I soon discover are the break-out star on the wellness scene. Known as 'magical plants', because they grow in harsh conditions and bring some of that hardness to your own body, they help lower stress and promote balance. But mostly I'm glad I found out more about my hormone levels. It's made me think of hormonal health in a totally different way, as well as understanding that it will change as I get older and different decades will bring different symptoms. I definitely won't take any notice of the shouty headlines from now on. I'll be too busy taking sound baths and getting my yoga-induced dopamine hits. Oh, and the pill? I'm coming off it.

