

Fountain of Youth:

The Natural Approach to Hormones

By Michelle Alpert, D.O.

Remember the magic of youth—the ability to stay up late, eat what you want and never gain weight, and draw on seemingly endless reserves of energy? As we approach middle age, that magic seems to subtly, irreversibly change. We confront wrinkles, weight gain, a lagging libido, mood swings, and troubled, fitful sleep.

Many of these unpleasant symptoms are due to diminished levels of hormones like estrogen, progesterone and testosterone. Significant health problems are linked to declining hormone levels—from osteoporosis to heart disease and high cholesterol, PMS, polycystic ovary syndrome, and infertility. And yet, for women in particular, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) may seem risky and confusing. The two largest studies of HRT—from the Women's Health Initiative and the Nurses Health Study—are contradictory. These two studies followed many thousands of women, and while the WHI found an increased risk of breast cancer, cardiac problems and strokes, the Nurse's Health Study found that hormone users were 40% less likely to suffer heart attacks than nonusers.

The number of patients with hormone problems have skyrocketed in the last decade. I think this is due, unfortunately, to the fact that so many women were put on birth control pills at a young age, flooding their body with extra hormones for which nature had never prepared them. In addition, all of us are at risk because of the hormone-like chemicals that we are constantly exposed to in our environment. First, for those of us who are meat eaters, our animals are often dosed inappropriately with hormones and antibiotics, which are passed on to us. In addition, plastics and pesticides contain xenobiotics, which are hormone-like substances that have been linked to rising rates of breast cancer, and falling rates of fertility and low sperm counts in men. These xenobiotics mimic estrogen. Even if you insist that your doctor measure your hormones—and that includes not just the sex hormones, but the whole interlocking choreography of thyroid, adrenal, and sex hormones—you will not be able to measure the amount of xenobiotics that may be derailing your natural cycle.

What should a health-conscious adult do? First, minimize unhealthy sources of hormones in your environment by favoring organic foods and grass-fed organic meats which do not use antibiotics or hormones; and avoid excessive use of plastic containers (as in plastic containers for water and soft drinks, as well as microwaving food in plastic dishes, using saran wrap in the microwave). Get close to nature: eat as much natural, wholesome food as you can. Find a knowledgeable physician who will measure your levels of hormones properly, and then prescribe correct amounts of bio-identical hormones from a compounding pharmacy. Commercial hormones are not chemically identical to our own (for instance, commercial estrogen is made from horse urine and is in a form that is differently structured than our own estrogen), and their half-life is extended. This also makes it harder to prescribe precise levels and to monitor them. Bio-identical hormones perfectly mimic the structure and availability of our own hormones, are made from natural substances like wild yams,

and can prove a powerful but gentle tool in bringing us into balance.

Bio-identical hormones are available in capsules, creams, or suppositories, but my strong preference is a sublingual tablet. Sublingual tablets are absorbed through the vascular system under the tongue and bypass the liver. If you take a regular tablet, especially a regular commercially available hormone tablet, the liver will have to metabolize most of the hormone, and that means that you need higher doses in order to get appropriate blood levels. This also puts a strain on the liver itself. Creams are very popular and absorbed directly into the fat and then the bloodstream, but I find they are hard to monitor precisely. A sublingual tablet is the most precise form, in my opinion. In addition, by using a sublingual tablet I can prescribe very low doses, which are much safer, and still get good effects.

I use two forms of testing to monitor my patients' hormone levels—saliva and blood. I look at the whole panoply of hormones, including adrenals, thyroid and sex hormones—and for sex hormones I look at a range, including the various forms of estrogen (estrone, estradiol, and estriol), progesterone, DHEA, and testosterone. For women with infertility problems or irregular cycles, I sometimes look at luteinizing and follicle-stimulating

hormone. For simple hormone problems, one blood test, as well as a saliva test around day 20 of a woman's cycle (when progesterone is peaking and I can get the most accurate level for interpretation) is sufficient. There are also specific tests for post-menopausal women. And for those with complicated problems such as fertility issues, I will monitor through the whole cycle. This means that every 3 days through a woman's cycle I will test the saliva. I've found women happy to do it, especially those having trouble getting pregnant who, once their hormones are balanced, find their problems resolved and a baby on the way.

I've found that saliva levels of progesterone in women tend to be higher than blood levels, and a relative progesterone deficiency is the most common cause of hormone-related problems in my female patients. This is partly because women tend to store more fat, which itself produces estrogen, and because of the xenobiotics that I mentioned above, which mimic estrogens. I use a firm called Diagnos-Techs to do all my hormone testing.

The human body makes the following three estrogens: estriol, which has been found to be somewhat anti-cancer, and then estradiol and estrone. Estradiol is the main estrogen secreted by the ovaries, and is widely used in commercial formulas, but higher levels do appear to stimulate existing cancers in some women. Estrone, similarly, can promote cancer in higher doses, according to some research. Thus, for women who are worried about risk, tiny doses of estriol may be safest. I begin by prescribing very low doses of bio-identical sublingual hormones, usually just progesterone, in the last half of the cycle. If problems only partially clear up, I measure hormones once again and may carefully add in a second hormone such as estrogen.

Used in a careful, individualized manner that is suited to each patient's needs and history, bio-identical hormones can profoundly improve quality of life. I use Wellness Pharmacy in Alabama to obtain (*continues on p. 45*)



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my bio-identical hormones. Other pharmacies compound them as well. Peri-menopausal women find that hot flashes melt away, while older women will see bone density slowly improve. Memory and mood, energy and sleep, are restored—and often women who were taking antidepressants can go off them as these underlying hormonal problems are addressed and fixed. And for some women, testosterone supplementation is also important. We think of testosterone as the male hormone, but small amounts are important for women, especially for maintaining an active sexual life. Testosterone is actually secreted by the ovaries, and also produced in the body by building-block hormones such as DHEA. Sometimes women who are receiving estrogen replacement therapy by itself, especially commercial estrogens, will end up with a testosterone deficiency. And as women age, some of them will become vulnerable to testosterone deficiency. Remarkably little amounts are needed to revive a lust for life.

I prescribe testosterone to men in their middle years as well. While women suffer through menopause, men suffer through a similar phase called andropause. Many have a mild or moderate testosterone deficiency, and supplementation can increase libido, sexual function, concentration, and mood. Finally, I find adrenal problems almost as common as imbalances in sex hormones. I measure cortisol quite often, usually through saliva tests, and find that low doses can be helpful in both men and women.

Don't wait until what one doctor, Uzzi Reiss, M.D., author of *Natural Hormone Balance* calls "hormonal ground zero" to address hormone problems. A good, protective, anti-aging program will be pro-active, and measure hormones before obvious symptoms set in. Since your regular physician is unlikely to understand all this, it's important to see a specialist who uses bio-identical hormones and monitors in depth.

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