

# 6 things you didn't know about... YOUR HORMONES

It's time to get clued up on these powerful chemical messengers and their effects

**H**ormones hugely influence our wellbeing – and we blame them for everything from skin breakouts and bloating to roller-coaster moods and mind fog. 'Hormones affect us through their daily subtle shifts, more strongly through the monthly cycle, and then through the massive hormonal swings during pregnancy, perimenopause and the menopause,' says Dr Marion Gluck, women's health specialist and author of *It's Not My Head, It's My Hormones* (£14.99, Orion Spring). While not everyone will struggle with these changes, many women suffer physically and emotionally. Here's the low-down on your hormones, and what helps so that they don't hijack your life.

**P**rogesterone balances oestrogen and is a mellowing hormone that calms the nervous system. 'Equilibrium between progesterone and oestrogen is key to wellbeing,' says Marion. 'Both hormones affect our menstrual cycle, fertility, mood and

metabolism. They act as a pair and belong together.' If you're irritable or anxious, it could be due to a dip – progesterone often decreases before oestrogen levels fall, so an imbalance is common in your 40s.

#### BALANCE IT

Evening primrose oil may help with mood swings. Try **Evening Primrose Softgels** (£5.50, [myprotein.com](http://myprotein.com)).

A balanced, low-fat diet with regular exercise maintains progesterone – being overweight can lower levels. Vitamins B6 and C, and magnesium are vital. For B6, eat walnuts, bananas, wholegrains, poultry and seafood. Good sources of vitamin C include leafy greens, broccoli, cauliflower and oranges. Magnesium-rich foods include nuts, spinach and pumpkin seeds.

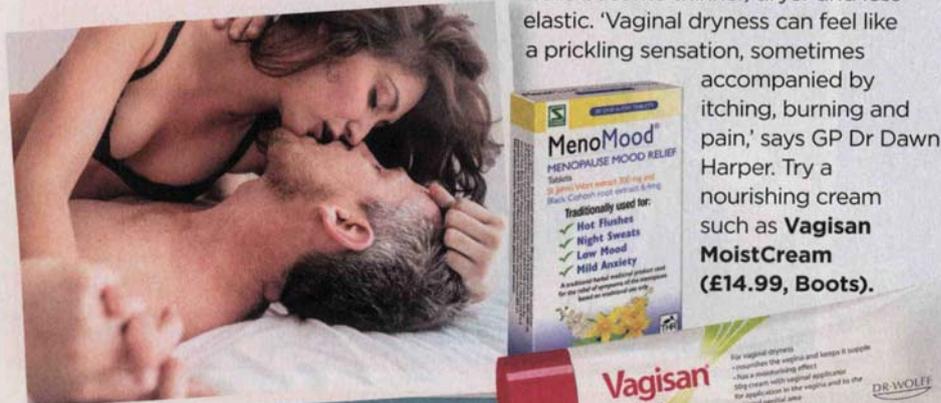


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**2 Oestrogen**  
 This mighty female hormone keeps us happy, calm and aids brain function, explains Marion. 'It can be a blessing or a bane as it naturally ebbs and flows through the various phases of our lives.' Oestrogen regulates the menstrual cycle, but plummeting levels during perimenopause can mean mood swings and anxiety. 'The amounts in our bodies

**diminish after menopause, but it never abandons us completely,' adds Marion.**  
**WHAT HELPS?**  
 Herbal remedies agnus castus and black cohosh may ease emotional turbulence. Studies also show St John's wort can help mild anxiety and depression. Try **Schwabe Pharma MenoMood, (£16.99, Holland & Barrett).**

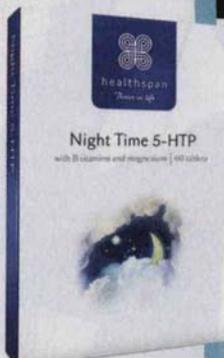
Declining oestrogen levels play havoc with a healthy sex life when the vaginal walls become thinner, dryer and less elastic. 'Vaginal dryness can feel like a prickling sensation, sometimes accompanied by itching, burning and pain,' says GP Dr Dawn Harper. Try a nourishing cream such as **Vagisan MoistCream (£14.99, Boots).**



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**3 Melatonin**  
This is our made-by-the-body's pineal gland and is the key hormone driving our sleep/wake cycle, says Rob Hobson, author of *The Art of Sleeping* (£6.99, HQ). 'Production occurs from around 9pm and levels stay elevated through the night, falling back to low daytime levels by about 9am.'

**REGULATE YOURS**  
Light suppresses the secretion of melatonin, so darken your bedroom with blackout blinds or use a sleep mask. Blue light from devices has a particularly negative effect. 'A magnesium supplement may improve levels of melatonin and sleep efficiency,' says Rob. Try **Night Time 5-HTP**, (£16.95, [healthspan.co.uk](http://healthspan.co.uk)).

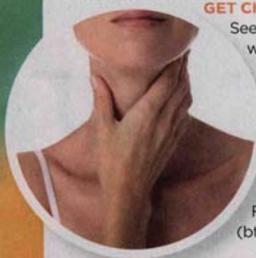




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**Health & Wellbeing**

**5 Thyroid hormones**  
 The thyroid gland at the base of the neck produces thyroxine (T4) and liothyronine (T3). 'These work together to influence practically every cell in the body,' says Marion. 'The pair help to maintain your sanity, energy and metabolism.' Stress, viruses, dietary changes and menopause can upset the balance of these hormones. This may result in hyperthyroidism - an overactive thyroid that speeds up metabolism, causing anxiety and irritability, or hypothyroidism - an underactive thyroid that slows metabolism, causing low mood and depression.



**GET CHECKED**  
 See your doctor with a suspected thyroid problem, especially if there's a family history. For more info, visit the British Thyroid Foundation ([btf-thyroid.org](http://btf-thyroid.org)).

WORDS: ALI HORSFALL. IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT YOUR HEALTH, SEE YOUR GP. PHOTOS: GETTY

**HRT EXPLAINED**  
 Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) replaces lost hormones to combat menopausal symptoms. It comes in different forms including tablets, gels and patches and most women take an oestrogen and progesterone combination. Those who don't have a womb can take oestrogen on its own.

**4 Testosterone**  
 Don't presume this only impacts men. 'It's also a female hormone, and women produce it in their ovaries and adrenal glands. The only difference is men have about 10 to 100 times more testosterone than women,' says Marion. Women need testosterone for sex drive, assertiveness and strong bones and muscles. Fatigue and loss of confidence can be a result of not having enough. Too much causes aggression, acne and excessive body hair.  
**BOOST YOURS**  
 Certain foods help lift levels



of testosterone, including garlic, eggs, oysters, almonds and spinach.  
**SUFFERING WITH A LOW LIBIDO?** Testosterone therapy on the NHS is currently unlicensed for female use in the UK. However, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) suggests that testosterone supplementation may help menopausal women with symptoms such as decreased sex drive, if HRT alone is not effective. Chat to your GP or consult a private practitioner about your options.

**6 DHEA**  
 'Produced in the brain and the adrenal glands, this life-affirming hormone gives drive and enthusiasm,' says Marion. DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone) is abundant in youth but eventually wanes to nothing - because it has such an energising effect we should harness it as long as possible. Symptoms of low levels of DHEA are commonly mistaken for depression because it results in exhaustion, low mood and reduced sex drive.



**PRESERVE IT**  
 Eat healthy fats with omega-3 fatty acids - oily fish, olive oil, coconut oil, avocados, flax seeds, walnuts and chia seeds. Stress exhausts the adrenal glands producing this hormone and also increases insulin and cortisol, which suppresses DHEA. Prioritise rest and try mindfulness techniques to reduce stress levels. Catch some sun. 'The same process that makes vitamin D, also produces DHEA,' says Marion.