

# Signs you might have a hormonal imbalance (and what it means)

[Science](#), [Biology](#)



Humans have many different hormones, all working away doing vital jobs in our bodies. They're our messengers, that keep our body temperature stable, moderate our growth and development, control our metabolism and fertility, and influence our emotions.

Many things affect the delicate balance of our hormones including what we eat, our environment and how we feel emotionally. Most of the time our hormones just get on with it without us really noticing. It's only when something goes wrong that we realise how important they are.

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Unfortunately our reptile brain hasn't caught up with our modern lifestyles, which is why now, more than ever before, we're experiencing a rise in unbalanced hormones and the conditions it can cause, from fatigue and depression to infertility.

We spoke to Hormone and Holistic Health Specialist, Dr Alyssa Burns-Hill PhD, author of *Weight Loss Winners & Dieting Downfalls: Hormonally Speaking*, about the most common hormone imbalances for younger women, signs you might have a problem and what it means for your health.

"It often boils down to a couple of obvious imbalances for younger women," Alyssa explains. "One is PMS (premenstrual syndrome), and the other is polycystic ovaries - though not necessarily the full blown polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) - just somewhere on that spectrum."

“ Broadly, PMS is to do with a dominance of oestrogen, while polycystic ovaries are related to too much testosterone.”

This woman died from a blood clot just weeks after starting the contraceptive pill

The pill is often used to treat PMS and PCOS

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These conditions are both common, and Alyssa believes underdiagnosed. In medical terms, the normal treatment for them is to ease the symptoms, rather than tackle the underlying problems.

“ The treatment for both is to be put on the pill, which isn’t a solution because it just regulates the cycle for the time you’re taking it. When you come off pill, the symptoms return and if you then want to have a baby you might find you struggle with fertility,” she says.

Signs your hormones are unbalanced

“ With too much oestrogen, typical symptoms are tender breasts, water retention, mood swings, irritability, and sweet or chocolate cravings and often heavy periods,” explains Alyssa.

All of these things are often put down to the ‘ typical’ experience of periods that any women have, but actually it’s because their hormones are out of whack.

“ You feel better when you eat chocolate, because your body makes serotonin (your happy hormone) from chocolate, so in a way you’re responding to your hormone needs. It’s just not the best way longterm.

Chocolate

Chocolate (sadly) isn’t the answer in the longterm

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“ Heavy periods are often a problem, because oestrogen is a hormone that makes the lining of the womb grow excessively. When you’re not trying to get pregnant this just causes heavy, sometimes debilitating periods, but when you are it can also wash out a conceptus (the embryo in the uterus in the very early stages of pregnancy) before it has a chance to implant properly. In this way it’s not that the woman is infertile, it’s just that her hormone imbalance is getting in the way of her body maintaining a successful pregnancy.”

From the other angle, polycystic ovary symptoms include “ acne, ongoing skin problems, excess facial or body hair, an irregular period and a different type of irritability. It’s a more aggressive kind, not weepy but more lion-like, from a sense of being frustrated.

“ It’s a problem of failed ovulation that creates cysts on the ovaries,” explains Alyssa.

Other symptoms of the full blown syndrome can include thinning hair, male pattern baldness - because of the excess of testosterone - and weight gain, especially around the middle because of an excess of insulin.

“ PCOS sufferers can have diabetes or pre-diabetes (insulin resistance), the condition that is linked to an excess of insulin, our blood sugar regulating hormone,” says the expert.

For both conditions there are mental health symptoms too. Too much oestrogen can cause mood swings and depression, as well as reduced sex drive.

“ Excess testosterone can cause mood disorders, including depression as high testosterone is linked with depression,” says Alyssa. “ And for GPs with patients presenting these symptoms, the usual prescription is for antidepressants - but underlying your low mood, could well be that hormone imbalance.”

#### How to improve a hormone imbalance

“ In many cases it’s easy to resolve these imbalances with lifestyle changes,” says Alyssa. You might need to change things in your diet, factors affecting your stress levels, or even start taking supplements.

And regardless of which hormones are unbalanced, the ways to tackle it are the same - living a healthier lifestyle and results can be seen fairly quickly.

#### Alcohol

“ Alcohol can spike your oestrogen level to the power of three. And while a spike is temporary, if you keep drinking regularly then it’s having a long term impact on your residual levels,” says Alyssa.

It’s not just binge drinking that’s a problem either. Regularly consuming alcohol can have serious problems “ Two or three glasses of wine after work is still quite excessive and potentially affecting your health and fertility.”

White wine

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Sugar

Sugar is a big one. “ It’s empty calories and ever-more studies show just how bad for us it is. Look at how much is in your diet, are you regularly snacking with sweet foods, are you consuming a lot of processed foods? Look at the levels your low fat choices, which we’ve been educated to believe is the healthy option, because these products often substitute fat with sugar or low-sugar substitute, which your body will still believe is sugar!”

Stress

Reducing stress and learning how to manage the factors that cause you stress is vital to long term healthy hormone balance.

“ Stress will affect a woman’s ability to ovulate, and ovulation is a key part of your hormonal cycle each month. You will still have a period if you don’t

ovulate, it's called an anovulatory cycle, and it's normal when it occurs occasionally. But it's not normal when it's happening every month."

## Exercise

Getting our bodies moving is vital to a healthy lifestyle, but it's finding the sweet spot between exercising enough and not overdoing it. Exercising too much can put stress on your body, but generally a mix of HIIT, weight training and cardio is a good way to boost your hormone health.

"Yoga and Pilates can help to stretch the muscles and be quietening for the body. There is good strength value here too," says Alyssa.

A boyfriend has been jailed for forcing his girlfriend to exercise

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## Adding to your diet

"Anything that helps move oestrogen through the body and break it down is good," Alyssa advises. "Cabbage, Brussel sprouts and spinach, all have something called indoles - they help your body break down oestrogen and process it to softer, safer oestrogens. And add a daily green smoothie to your diet."

## Supplements

Supplements aren't designed to make up for an unhealthy diet or lifestyle, but adding in a few things to help during difficult periods can make a real difference.

“ For mood disorders, I have had great success with 5HTP. It boosts serotonin and will help you feel more robust in yourself, and sleep better. And it starts to work much quicker than antidepressants. (Though if you are taking antidepressants do not use 5HTP because you could run the risk of Serotonin Syndrome, which is too much of the hormone.)”

She adds: “ To break down oestrogen you can get good-quality DIM or I3C supplements which can be beneficial.”

How will you know if you're balancing out again?

“ The tell tale with a woman is the monthly cycle,” says Alyssa. “ If you've made real changes, give yourself a cycle to notice if things are improving. It won't happen all at once but you should find your period doesn't feel quite as draining and heavy. Over a few cycles you should notice more improvements as well as better regularity and predictability.

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“ Things like hair and skin, with polycystic ovaries, do take a little longer to respond, but pay attention to how you're feeling in yourself. Is your mood better? Are you finding it easier to lose weight?



“ We look outwards for a lot of solutions, but we need to get to know ourselves inside out,” advises Alyssa. “ Pay attention to what going on within in us and let that be our guide, giving us the recognition that things are changing and the resolve to carry on.”