

What doctors tell their friends about **hormones**

Hormones get blamed, not entirely unfairly, for everything: acne, belly fat, manic mood swings. But they can also do a lot of good, and this insider info will help you harness their power.

BY STEPHANIE WOOD

THEY'RE EVERYWHERE

"A lot of women hear the word *hormones* and think of their monthly cycles, but the endocrine system does so much more than produce estrogen and progesterone. I tell people to think of it as a wireless network. While the nervous system is like a landline, made up of nerves that travel out into the body, the endocrine system is chemical—there are no tangible connectors—and it covers just as much ground. A lot of it is regulated by two glands in your brain, the hypothalamus and pituitary. So let's say your thyroid is underperforming: The hypothalamus will ping the pituitary gland, telling it to make more thyroid-stimulating hormone. When you're dehydrated, the hypothalamus sends a hormone to your kidneys to tell them to hold onto water, creating the dark yellow urine that signals you to drink more. Our goal is to help you keep these hormones in balance, by managing chronic stress, prescribing medication—whatever it takes." —Bradley Anawalt, M.D., board-certified endocrinologist and chief of medicine at the University of Washington Medical Center in Seattle

PAY ATTENTION TO THAT COUGH

"I know a woman who developed shortness of breath early in her second pregnancy. I suggested she talk to her ob/gyn, who referred her to a pulmonologist. To her surprise, she was

diagnosed with adult-onset asthma. It's more common in women than men, so a hormone connection is likely. In fact, asthma symptoms can get worse when women have PMS, and the more children they have, the higher their risk grows. So take symptoms like coughing, shortness of breath, and decreased endurance very seriously. I just diagnosed a woman with asthma who had been coughing for years and didn't think twice about it. That's dangerous, because adult asthma can be more severe and more persistent—and if it's left unchecked, lung function declines, so the standard therapies may not work as well." —Suzette Garofano, M.D., board-certified pulmonologist and associate professor at New York University Langone Medical Center

HORMONES CAN MESS WITH YOUR HEART

"A friend of mine started having heart palpitations at night when she was in her mid-40s. She was smart and went to a cardiologist, who monitored her heart for a few weeks. When she told me they didn't find anything ominous, I suggested that her symptoms might be due to perimenopause, which can begin as early as your late 30s. Long before women develop hot flashes, surges and plunges in estrogen and progesterone can cause their heart to flutter. The science is still unclear, but I prescribed my friend some natural progesterone to take before bed each night—it's been known to help. And unlike other symptoms of perimenopause, heart palpitations are usually temporary. My friend took the progesterone for about a month, and the palpitations never came back." —Katherine Sherif, M.D., director of Jefferson Women's Primary Care and professor of medicine at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia

DIABETES LOOKS DIFFERENT THAN YOU THINK

"A friend came to me once with a dark patch on her neck that wouldn't go away. I told her she needed to be tested for diabetes right away. Dark, velvety patches on the neck, under the arms or breasts, and in the groin area can be signs that your bloodstream has too much insulin—the hormone your cells use to absorb glucose. Insulin resistance occurs when the body doesn't use it effectively, so more insulin is needed, leading to



GALLERY STOCK

diabetes. Skin tags on the neck are another red flag. Women with these symptoms are what we often call prediabetic. The good news is you can often reverse this condition by improving your diet and exercising more. But other factors, including genetics, also play a role in diabetes. If you're concerned, talk to your doctor."

—Genevieve Neal-Perry, M.D., Ph.D., director of the University of Washington Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility Center, and spokesperson for the Hormone Health Network of the Endocrine Society

DON'T TOUCH THAT RECEIPT!

"You've probably heard of endocrine disruptors, chemicals that act like hormones in the body; they may impact fertility and cause developmental defects. One of the most publicized is BPA. Manufacturers have started to remove it from plastics and food packaging, but I tell every woman I know to also avoid receipts printed from a cash register, gas pump, or ATM. These receipts are coated with BPA, and it gets into your bloodstream much faster that way—probably because lotion, hand sanitizer, even the grease from French fries make the skin more porous. Endocrine disruptors pass through your system fairly quickly, but you have to try to limit your exposure. Opt for email receipts whenever possible, and if you must get a receipt, try not to handle it for long." —R. Thomas Zoeller, Ph.D., cochair of the Endocrine Society's Global Task Force on Endocrine-Disrupting Chemicals and professor of biology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst

THERE'S A FIX FOR YOUR LOW LIBIDO

"I've known women who struggled with their sex drive while they were on the Pill. It levels out the hormonal surges that cause women to ovulate, but in some cases, it can also suppress desire. Since the estrogen and progestin the Pill uses are synthetic, they may cause bloating and moodiness—not great for your libido either. I'll often suggest that friends try an IUD instead. The hormones in devices like Mirena, Skyla, and Liletta stay mostly

“ I tell every woman I know to avoid printed receipts! ”

within your uterus, where they wreak less havoc than they would if they traveled through your bloodstream. And ParaGard—the copper-releasing IUD that's toxic to sperm—uses no hormones at all. A lot of women are apprehensive about the procedure, especially if they've never had children, but know this: IUDs are usually inserted when you're ovulating or on your period, and your cervix is naturally a little more open then." —Diana Bitner, M.D., board-certified obstetrician-gynecologist in Grand Rapids, MI, and author of *I Want to Age Like That*

TRY BLINKING LIKE THIS

"A friend in her early 40s told me that her eyes often felt gritty and dry. Other days they would tear constantly. I knew right away that she had severe dry eye, no doubt a combination of hormonal changes and too much screen time. I explained that a group of hormones called androgens help regulate the glands that produce oil—the stuff that prevents tears from evaporating too quickly. As androgen levels decrease with age, so can the number of tears your eyes produce, as well as their quality. There are lots of ways to treat it, starting with forcing yourself to blink more often and more dramatically: Squeeze your eyes tightly shut and hold them that way for a few seconds. This pushes out more oil from the glands. You should also stay hydrated, take frequent screen breaks, and eat plenty of omega-3 fatty acids. Use artificial tears, too, and if you still have symptoms, ask your doctor about a prescription eye drop that can help you produce more tears." —Christopher E. Starr, M.D., director of laser vision correction and refractive surgery, the cornea fellowship program, and ophthalmic education at Weill Cornell Medical Center, New York-Presbyterian Hospital in New York City