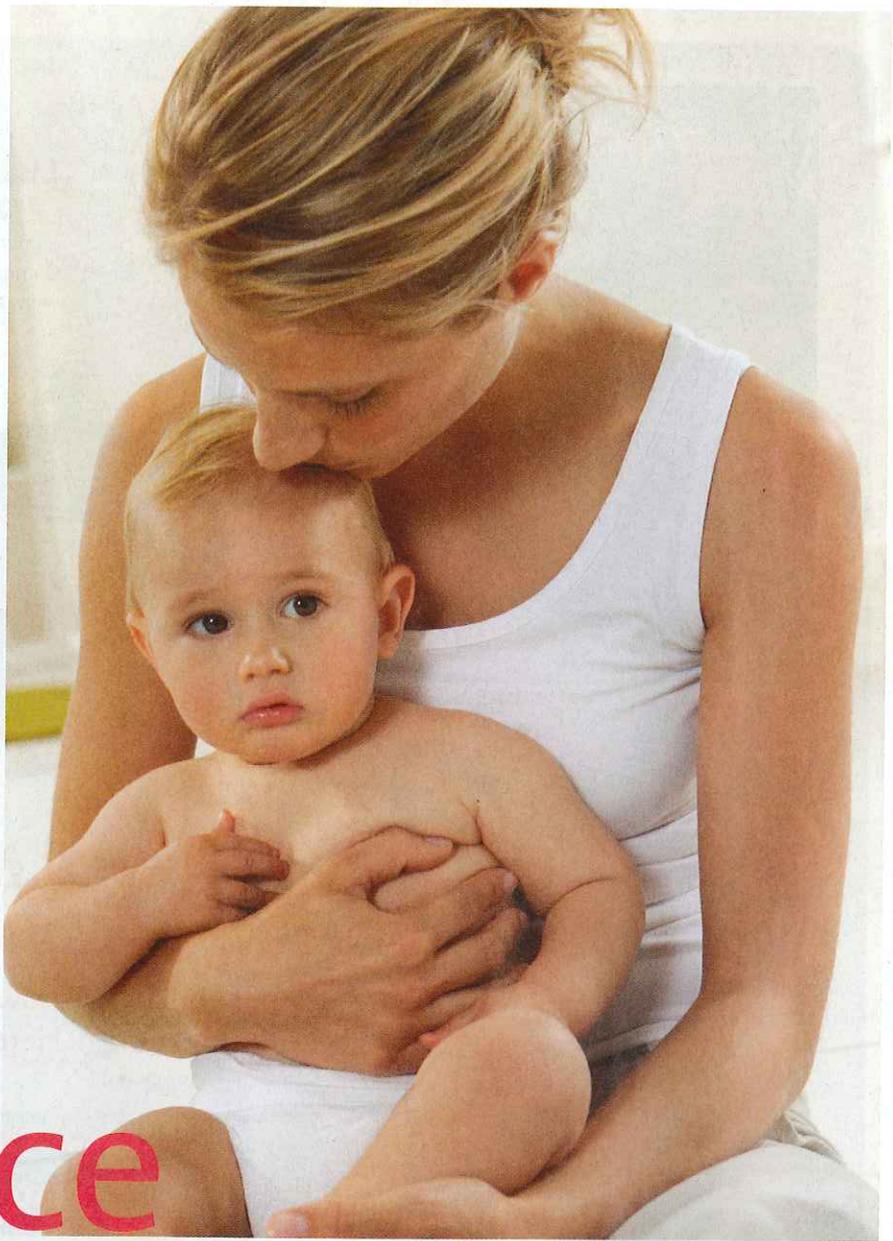


Do you often feel unusually tired? Are you frequently stressed or easily irritated? Do you suffer from mood swings or hot flushes? Have your periods stopped or become irregular? If you answered yes to any of these, you may be experiencing hormonal imbalance.

# Out of balance



**Few of us** would disagree that the frantic pace of modern life and increased pressure on our time while juggling children, work and busy households can be exhausting. If hormones are out of balance as well, normal functioning in the home and workplace can be unnecessarily hard to achieve.

So, how do we recognise hormones out of sync, and differentiate these conditions from the expected exhaustion and irritability that is often caused by the juggling act most women with young children perform these days?

The most important symptoms that shouldn't be ignored are periods becoming irregular or ceasing completely, the inability to become pregnant, leakage of milk from the breasts (when not associated with pregnancy), hot flushes, unexplained weight changes, intolerance of heat or the cold, extreme fatigue, such as needing a nap or sleep during the day, changes in skin colour, unusual thirst, more

frequent urination and/or frequent infections. These symptoms could indicate unusual levels of thyroid hormones, lack of cortisol (required to help the body respond to stress as well as other important health functions), deficient oestrogen levels, or even diabetes.

The main organs involved in balancing a woman's reproductive hormones are the hypothalamus (a tiny organ in the brain), the pituitary gland and the ovaries. The hypothalamus acts like a conductor in the hormonal orchestra, directing the pituitary gland to start the hormonal process, which in turn stimulates ovarian function. If this interaction is disconnected for any reason, then oestrogen levels become abnormally low and symptoms ensue.

So, what impact does all of this have on women? For many, it creates a hormonal imbalance as oestrogen levels lower to a level that is more commonly associated with

menopausal women. This in turn can cause hot flushes, periods to become irregular, sexual libido to drop off and mood changes.

In the longer term, women risk loss of bone mass, increased risk of fractures and osteoporosis, and for some, an increased risk of heart disease.

For the many women experiencing these symptoms, it can dramatically affect their everyday lives and relationships with family and friends. Often they will put their symptoms down to overworking, lack of sleep, running after children, and dealing with financial or relationship pressures – meaning the imbalance often goes undetected and untreated.

## How it occurs

Oestrogen deficiency can occur if the pituitary gland malfunctions or secretes too much of the milk hormone, or if a woman starts >

menopause at an unusually early age – although this occurs in about 1 in 1000 women.

More commonly, a situation of reversible or temporary menopause is caused by a woman's restricted nutrition (for example, those who may have an overzealous adherence to healthy foods), weight loss to below the normal range, excessive aerobic exercise (for example, more than 5 hours per week), long-term or intense emotional or physical stress, and more, especially if any of these lifestyle factors occur in combination.

### What you can do

For many women, correcting hormonal imbalance requires a 'whole life' approach including changes to diet, exercising and managing stress levels, and may include non-evidence based remedies, such as

homoeopathy, acupuncture and herbal remedies.

It is important to seek medical assistance and advice from your GP if any of these symptoms persist. A referral to an endocrinologist and/or nutritionist or psychologist may also be suggested by your doctor.

#### Diet:

- Women need sensible energy intake that relates to their work and exercise patterns.
- Ensure a diet with as much unprocessed food as possible.
- Aim for seven servings of vegetables and fruit per day.
- Make sure each meal contains at least one serving of protein, such as lean meat, milk, eggs, legumes and many grains and

vegetables.

- Add more fish to the diet, especially salmon, herring and pilchards, as well as whole grains, iodine and iron.
- It's important not to avoid carbohydrates and fat as these both have important functions in the brain and to replace energy reserves. Reduce foods that contain high saturated fats from the diet (such as cheeses, fried foods and takeaways), and increase foods containing mono-unsaturated fats (such as olive oil, flax seed oil, canola oil and avocado).
- Underweight women need appropriate endocrine and nutritional advice as to a healthy weight to maintain to ensure reproductive health.

#### Exercise:

- Exercise is important for many reasons other than improving your mood and making you feel good. Regular exercise helps protect the brain and your bones and it decreases the risk of heart disease and diabetes.
- However, too much exercise can switch off the reproductive system. It is essential that a healthy balance of exercise and nutrition is maintained to ensure normal weight levels. If excessive exercise is the cause for your periods to stop, this can be detrimental to your overall health in the long-term.

#### Environment:

- Avoid known toxins to the reproductive system, such as cigarettes and recreational drugs that can aggravate symptoms related to hormonal imbalance.
- Also, take a look at the balance in your life. Female hormones are all about striking a sensible balance between work, nutrition, exercise and stress. Good practice might be to take a night class, find a regular 'time out' time just for you, go for regular walks with a friend or group of mums, or keep a journal for thoughts and visualisations – whatever it takes to bring harmony back to your life and your hormones. ■

STELLA MILSOM, REPRODUCTIVE ENDOCRINOLOGIST, FERTILITY ASSOCIATES AUCKLAND.

*If you are ever concerned about symptoms that might be related to hormonal imbalance, contact your doctor or health professional for advice.*

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