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What does hormone imbalance mean and how can it affect me?

By Dr. Jennifer Bunzenmeyer ND

Pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS), irregular menses, infertility, fibrocystic breasts, uterine fibroids and menopause are representative of women's health conditions that are caused by an imbalance in hormones. Causes can include exogenous estrogens; chemicals found in food, air and water; malfunctions in liver detox pathways and stress.

Xenoestrogens found in plastics, pesticides, detergents, solvents and chlorinated water are chemicals that mimic estrogen and cause an excess estrogen state. Lowered estrogen removal by the liver can also contribute to this excess. When estrogen is overabundant, progesterone becomes low in relative. In blood work, these hormones can appear normal but not be balanced in relation to each other and their actions within the tissues. Saliva hormone testing can give a better picture of what hormone levels are within the tissues where the actual action of the hormone takes place.

Lowered progesterone or progesterone low in relation to the levels of estrogen present can lead to an irregular or shortened menstrual cycle; PMS symptoms like irritability and anxiety; uterine fibroids and ongoing heavy bleeding through the month. Decreasing estrogen through support of the liver detox pathways and supplementation of progesterone-supporting substances such as chastetree, vitamin B6 and evening primrose oil can help the situation.

The liver makes cholesterol which is the 'backbone' to all our hormones. It also breaks down estrogen and sends it to the intestines to be excreted. If this function is jeopardized, the result is an excess of estrogen in our body. Liver function is hindered by chemicals in food, pollution, environmental toxins, bowel toxicity, high fat diets, drugs, alcohol and nutritional deficiencies. Naturopathic doctors seek to optimize liver function with B vitamins, milk thistle, dandelion, rosemary and choline. Liver detox programs and support are a very effective way to enhance liver function.

Stress can cause a hormonal imbalance by increasing production of the stress hormones including adrenalin and cortisol. This causes progesterone, estrogen, testosterone and thyroid hormone production to be 'sacrificed' in lieu of making more of the stress hormones. For example, in menopause ovarian hormone production decreases and therefore the adrenal glands are called upon to make more estrogen and progesterone to provide a balanced transition into menopause. An overabundance of stress contributes to a decrease in estrogen and progesterone production in the adrenals. Then a further sudden large drop in estrogen causes symptoms such as hot flashes, insomnia and decreased thinking and memory function. The effects of stress are also significant contributors to other women's health concerns such as lack of ovulation, infertility and polycystic ovarian syndrome.

Hormonal imbalance is a major contributing factor to a variety of women's health concerns. By looking at proper estrogen metabolism, hormone balance, lifestyle factors, liver function and decreasing stress, naturopathic doctors are able to help with this imbalance and optimize health.