Healthy HAPPY HORMONES

Discover the connection between your hormones & your mental wellbeing and how food & lifestyle change can help

HEALTHY, HAPPY HORMONES

When you think about mental health, you're probably thinking about your brain and how that works. The picture is often much more complex. Hormones play a big part because these chemical messengers are the background to everything that happens in your body. How you feel, therefore, is not just psychological, it's biological.

Did you know, there are a huge number of symptoms that are common to both depression and hormonal imbalance? These include low energy, dizziness, low mood, apathy, anxiety, irritability, anger, lack of enthusiasm, despair, headaches, poor concentration, feelings of hopelessness, lack of confidence, low libido, fuzzy brain, memory loss, and insomnia (although there are others).

Rebalancing your hormones naturally is not something that happens overnight but it can be greatly improved with the help of nutritional and lifestyle change. This guide will allow you to pinpoint where you might need help or support.

Mood & Your Cycle

Two of the main hormones that affect your feeling of mental wellbeing and clarity are oestrogen and progesterone, and these change throughout your menstrual cycle. It's an over simplification – but perhaps a helpful one – to think about oestrogen largely bringing positive effects to your mood and progesterone contributing more negative effects. With such a pronounced hormonal connection on mental health, it's small wonder that women are twice as likely to suffer from depression than men.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 64% of women who suffer from depression say their symptoms get worse during the pre-menstrual period. Hormones are also likely to contribute to antenatal or postnatal depression, which affect around 10-15% of new mothers. And anxiety and depression are also starting to be recognised as symptoms of the peri-menopause on top of hot flushes and night sweats.

HOW IT WORKS

At certain times in your cycle (in the run-up to ovulation), there will be lots of oestrogen in your system and women tend to feel brighter and better in their mood. You might even notice at this time you feel better at talking and articulating yourself. In the second half of your cycle, oestrogen dips and progesterone comes into play. For some women, this can lead to lowered mood or depression.

pms or pmdd?

You might already experience this as Pre-menstrual Syndrome (PMS), a very common condition linked to the changing levels of these hormones, that might include feelings of bloating, breast tenderness or headaches, or manageable emotional symptoms like irritability.

For a small number of women (about 2-8%), the effect of these hormones on their mental wellbeing is pronounced. This is called Pre-menstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD); an extreme form of PMS and one that, if you think might apply to you, you will want to ask your doctor about.

WHY DOES THIS HAPPEN?

One of the first things to know is that the production of dopamine and serotonin (the two main brain chemicals associated with the development of depression and psychosis) is heavily linked to levels of oestrogen.

Research seems to suggest that there isn't a noticeable difference in levels of oestrogen between those who are affected by mental health symptoms around their period or during the menopause – it seems some women are just especially sensitive to hormonal change, or perhaps also that lifestyle problems like stress may also play a big part.

Other Hormones

TESTOSTERONE

You might think of testosterone as the male hormone and, while men do produce much higher levels, every woman needs testosterone, too. Testosterone can increase sexual desire and libido, make bones and muscles strong, and have you feeling assertive and confident. The downside can be anger and aggression.

THYROID

Altered levels of thyroid hormones impact on mental wellbeing. If you just don't feel like yourself, feel lethargic and low, it could be that your levels of active thyroid hormone are low.

CORTISOL

Cortisol is one of the main stress hormones and, when stress levels are high, literally any of the mood-related symptoms I have mentioned in any of the previous pages might be present.

OXYTOCIN

Oxytocin directly opposes cortisol. It's the love hormone and, if you have children, you might recognise it as the hormone that floods women after childbirth to encourage bonding. It has a direct effect on appetite, insulin resistance, weight loss – and your mood.

IMPACT OF HORMONES ON YOUR BLOOD SUGAR LEVELS

Declining oestrogen levels have a role to play in insulin sensitivity (that means how sensitive – or not – the cells in your body are to the fat storage hormone insulin). In fact, a lack of sensitivity to insulin (or even being resistant to the effects of insulin) is lurking behind many of the common menopause symptoms, like hot flushes, fatigue and weight gain as well as symptoms of low mood like brain fog, anxiety and depression.

YOUR HORMONE BALANCING ACTION PLAN

"Hormones and mental health" is a complex picture in which your physiological health and mental wellbeing are inextricably intertwined. It's best to work with a nutrition practitioner to unravel this for you. They will be able to piece together a hormone- balancing food and lifestyle plan to suit your circumstances. However, there are a few simple rules that you can start to bring into your life right now.

Your hormone balancing action plan

EAT REAL FOOD

If your hormones are out of whack or you struggle with anything to do with your mood, the very first thing to do is to take a good look at your diet and consider how much 'real food' you eat and how much of your diet is processed. If you ONLY switched to real food, making everything from scratch, you would see a big improvement in your health. Ready to do more?

BRING IN MORE FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

Fruit and vegetables are packed full of nutrients compared to many other foods and are beneficial for all aspects of health. Focus on the low-sugar fruits (the ones that grow in this country ahead of tropical fruits like bananas, mango and pineapple). For veg, eat more of the stuff that grows above the ground as – as a general rule – it contains less starch and keeps blood sugar levels stable.

EAT PROTEIN REGULARLY

Choose a source of protein at every meal and snack. Protein is needed for growth and repair in the body. Good sources of protein include eggs, organic meat and poultry, oily fish like wild salmon, trout, etc. and Greek yoghurt, nuts and seeds.

Your hormone balancing action plan

THINK CAREFULLY ABOUT STARCHY CARBOHYDRATES

Carbohydrates can be broken down into simple carbs and complex carbs. In simple carbs, the sugar molecules that occur either naturally or as a result of added sugar are quickly digested and absorbed into the bloodstream. Examples of simple carbs are cakes, cookies and pastries (in fact, anything with sugar), white bread, rice and pasta, and potato. The result is you get a short-term high but afterwards you feel more tired, fuzzy-headed and hungry.

Complex carbs are made up of hundreds of sugar molecules, and these are absorbed much more slowly so they keep you feeling fuller and focussed for longer. Focus on bringing more of these into your diet ahead of simple carbs. They include wholemeal bread and pasta, brown rice, oats, beans, chickpeas and lentils, quinoa, sweet potato and butternut squash.

DO EAT FAT

Healthy fats are an essential part of a good diet and should not be seen as the enemy. Fats are also the building blocks of all hormones and keep cell membranes and nerve cells healthy. The best sources of fat are flaxseeds (also known as linseeds), avocado, olive oil, coconut oil, oily fish like wild salmon, nuts and seeds.

Your hormone balancing action plan

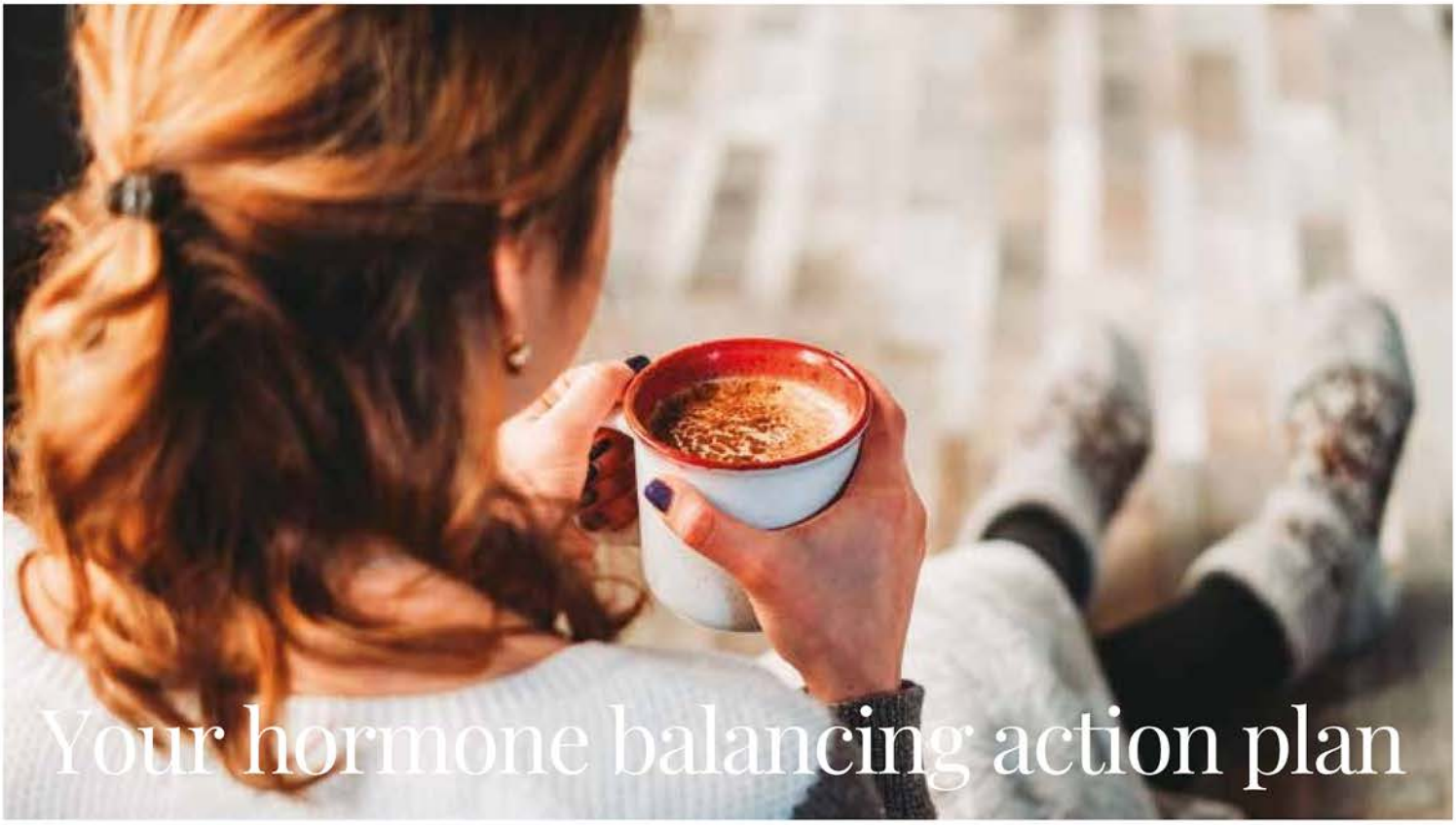
PRIORITISE SLEEP

There are some actions you can take to make a good sleep much more likely. These include things like avoiding drinks containing caffeine after lunch, going to bed at the same time every day, keeping the temperature in your bedroom comfortable, keeping the bedroom completely dark so you're not disturbed by light and making an effort to relax for at least 5 minutes before going to bed - a warm bath, massage, meditation and so on.

The biggest tip I can give you is to really ensure that you prioritise your sleep. Make a real effort to focus on all the things you can do to improve your sleep hygiene rather than 'kind of' do it.

MOVE YOUR BODY

Exercise can have a noticeable effect on hormones and mood. You might have heard how exercise releases endorphins and the feel-good hormones dopamine and serotonin.
Instead of moving in such a way that you place excessive stress on the body, consider how your body likes to move. Focus on things like brisk walks, yoga or pilates, and dance classes ahead of more punishing regimes involving spin classes and long runs.



Your hormone balancing action plan

IMPROVE YOUR DIGESTIVE HEALTH

There might seem quite a geographical distance between your digestive system and your brain but the two are actually very closely connected. In fact, the digestive system is often referred to as the 'second brain'. If you have any problems with your digestive system, it will be worth working on these with a nutrition professional. Your coach will be able to advise if any functional testing might be appropriate to look for food reactions (allergies or intolerances) or a broader test to see whether you might have bacterial imbalance or infection.

For the purposes of this guide, it might be helpful to ensure you regularly eat probiotic foods like natural yoghurt, kefir and kombucha (all are now widely available even in supermarkets) or even take a probiotic supplement.

REDUCE STRESS

Taking action to reduce stress in your life is essential but many people are concerned the specific things they might do are too much of a luxury in their already-busy lives. Bottom line: you can't simply keep going the way things are. Taking some time to empty the 'stress bucket' is critical for your wellbeing. Yoga and mindfulness/meditation are proven ways to reduce stress but consider taking time out just to do the things you love to do quietly, mindfully and on your own: sitting in the garden with a cuppa, reading, colouring, knitting or trying out a new hobby.