

BAZAAR^{Harper's}

ARE YOUR HORMONES MAKING YOU CRAZY?

It's not all in your head. Here's how to get back in balance.



Mood swings like you're a teenager again. A feeling of brain fog. About as much interest in sex as in doing your

taxes. These are some of the shockingly common complaints heard in doctors' offices around the country. The one thing these varied woes share? Fluctuating hormones. "Your body is a finely tuned hormonal symphony," says integrative physician Tami Meraglia, author of *The Hormone Secret*, and, consequently, even very slight changes can yield enormous side effects.

"Somewhere in your mid-30s to early 40s, levels of key hormones shift as the body progresses through perimenopause toward menopause," says Sara Gottfried, an integrative physician and the author of *The Hormone Reset Diet*. "Many women don't realize that these changes can happen as young as 35," she says. How to fight back? Every woman is different, but the experts agree that dietary supplements and bioidentical hormones can be effective tools.

Unfortunately, it's not as simple as having a blood test to determine your hormone levels. For one thing, hormones can rise and dip dramatically over the course of six months, says Mary Jane Minkin, a clinical professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the Yale School of Medicine. What's more, you can have levels that fall within the "normal" range but still suffer dramatic side effects, notes Meraglia. So ask your doctor for blood tests to determine your levels, but then have her repeat them once you've had treatment and feel better so that you know "what your levels are when they are optimized," says internist Erika Schwartz, author of *Don't Let Your Doctor Kill You*. Here, a hormone cheat sheet.

PROGESTERONE: "THE PEACEKEEPER" This is the hormone that starts to dip first as you age, says Meraglia. Sometimes called the Valium of the female mind, progesterone can cause you to feel increasingly anxious, frustrated, and short-tempered when levels dip. Sinking levels can also cause insomnia, and since progesterone has a natural diuretic effect, a lack can leave you feeling perpetually bloated. What to do: Hormone therapy (either bioidentical or traditional) can help. But supplements may also give significant relief, says Gottfried, who suggests 750 milligrams a day of vitamin C or 500 to 1,000 milligrams of chasteberry.

TESTOSTERONE: "THE LOVER AND THE FIGHTER" Next up for departure: testosterone, which plays a key role in our sex drive as well as in our ability to hang on to muscle. "Dwindling testosterone affects your muscle-to-fat ratio—tilting more toward fat," says Meraglia. "And with less muscle tissue, your metabolism slows down." A lack of testosterone can also put a serious damper on your libido. "Getting it back to normal really moves the needle on how people feel quickly," Meraglia adds. What to do: Because the amount of testosterone in a woman's body is so small, raising it just a teeny bit can make a huge difference, explains Schwartz. Taking 500 to 1,000 milligrams of the herb ashwagandha daily can increase testosterone by helping support the adrenal glands, says Meraglia. Something as simple as changing your posture can boost it too. Think Wonder Woman: hands on hips, chest up and out. In one study, people who held

"high-power poses" for two minutes had a 19 percent increase in testosterone. For some, there's also the option of testosterone therapy: "The best way to safely prescribe it in low doses is to have it compounded for a particular woman in a cream or gel," says Schwartz.

ESTROGEN: "THE MOOD LIFTER" Estrogen helps make you feel even-keeled and keeps you on task. "It's nature's Prozac, adjusting the levels of available serotonin so it's in more ready supply," explains Gottfried. So when estrogen dips, you may find yourself weathering unpredictable and stormy moods. "It also keeps your libido high by keeping genital skin sensitive with an active blood supply," she adds. What to do: For some women, simply going on a low-dose combination birth-control pill can be a relatively fast, easy way to even things out, Minkin says. Prescription estradiol in a cream, patch, or gel may also be an option, says Schwartz: It can "not only improve your mood and clear your brain fog but help you lose weight." More natural relief can be found in the herb maca (1,000 to 2,000 milligrams) or black cohosh (40 milligrams).