

## Help for Hormones

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Optimizing hormones can significantly contribute to a woman's health and wellbeing. Hormone therapy is a complex and contentious issue, with many women left confused about how to balance the benefits and risks of taking hormones. There are many treatment options available to balance female hormones, ranging from lifestyle interventions, natural medicines and pharmaceutical medicines. Let's take a look at some safe and effective strategies for balancing hormones while taking into consideration one's long term health.

It is important to help the body balance its own hormones by creating a favourable environment for the hormones to function optimally. Good nutrition, exercise and stress management really do make a difference when it comes to hormone health. If your hormones are on a roller-coaster, it may be time to take stock of your lifestyle and ask yourself if it is conducive to good hormonal health.

We know that the ovaries make estrogen, but did you know that the adrenal glands make 40% of your pre-menopausal estrogen and a higher percentage post-menopausally? The adrenal glands also make stress hormones, so if your adrenals glands are coping with a high amount of stress, the female hormones will become imbalanced, especially around menopause. Therefore, stress management and natural medicines that fortify the adrenal glands are an integral part of a holistic treatment plan.

The liver and colon also play a role in the elimination of estrogen. When the liver and colon are not detoxifying optimally, estrogen metabolites can build up, creating a syndrome known as estrogen dominance. Common symptoms of estrogen dominance are PMS, breast tenderness, migraine headaches, menstrual disturbances, fibroids, ovarian cysts, sleeplessness, anxiety and gallbladder problems. Natural medicines such as milk thistle, flax seeds and probiotics can help create an environment where the body can eliminate estrogen. Cabbage family vegetables also promote estrogen metabolism in the liver. One well studied herb for balancing both teen and pre-menopausal hormone issues is called *Vitex agnus castus*. It increases the ovarys' output of progesterone and increases a happy chemical in the brain called dopamine. Another commonly used herbal medicine is black cohosh. If a strong formulation is used, it helps reduce menopausal hot flashes for most women.

There are times when women can benefit from taking estrogen and progesterone. Each situation needs to be carefully evaluated, but the general principle that naturopathic physicians follow is that we should use the lowest dosage of hormones, in the safest form, for the shortest period of time possible. Bioidentical hormones are hormones that are chemically identical to those made in the body. Since pharmaceutical companies traditionally couldn't patent naturally occurring chemicals, they preferred to use horse urine estrogen (Premarin) and a chemical cousin of progesterone called progestin (Provera). These were the medicines researched in the large Women's Health Initiative study that showed that after 5 years of use there is a slight increase in breast cancer and

an increased risk of blood clots causing strokes. One of the many bioidentical estrogens, Estriol, is considered to be a milder and therefore safer form of estrogen. I feel quite comfortable prescribing Estriol topically as a treatment for vaginal dryness associated with menopause. I also use it for women who are currently on Premarin or estradiol preparations and want to wean onto a safer form of estrogen. Progesterone in its bioidentical form can be a good alternative for women suffering from menopausal hot flashes, anxiety, sleep issues and more. Even without using estrogen many women find effective relief from progesterone. It is ideally used in a cream form and applied to the forearms. Using it transdermally allows us to reduce the dose to 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the oral dose.

There are many options available for safely and effectively balancing women's hormones. Each woman is unique. In my opinion, the ideal plan follows the principle of lifestyle first, natural medicines second, and the safest pharmaceuticals last.

*For more information on hormone health check out Dr. Macdonald's articles at [www.getwellhere.com](http://www.getwellhere.com) or contact her naturopathic medical office at 250 897-0235 to schedule a consultation. Dr. Deidre Macdonald has been practicing naturopathic medicine in downtown Courtenay for 14 years and has a special interest in women's health concerns. She is licensed to prescribe most pharmaceutical medicines.*