Hormonal Balance
The word “hormone” means “to set in motion”. Hormones are released and travel through our bodies telling it what to do and how to respond. They’re our body’s messengers. They affect our mood, our concentration, energy, sex drive, hair, skin, height, weight, heart, brain, sleep, appetite. Everything! And they’re also affected by everything: what we eat, how much we sleep, our stress, what we put on our skin, what we think and how we feel. And they’re affected by each other. Our hormones work in harmony with each other. When one is off-key, the others can’t send their messages correctly and signs of illness develop.

**Stress Hormones**

Cortisol and Adrenaline are the major stress hormones. When we’re under stress, our adrenal glands release hormones that help us prepare to either fight our enemy or run away from danger. Adrenaline is what makes our heart beat faster, our muscles tense and our mind race. Cortisol sends glucose into our blood and slows activities our body doesn’t rely on in a crisis mode, such as digestion and sexual responses. Under ideal circumstances, the stress response is followed by a period of relaxation: we calm down; our breathing and heart rate return to normal. Our bodies can’t easily distinguish actual danger from our fear of impending doom, so feeling “stressed out” by everything from a cranky boss, a mountain of unfolded laundry, hectic work schedules and months of not enough sleep can push our adrenal glands to the point of exhaustion. The stress hormones get unbalanced, and symptoms of adrenal fatigue can range from feeling anxious, tense and on edge to feeling worn out, unmotivated and fatigued, to a confusing collision of both.

Imbalanced levels of these important stress hormones affect almost all our other hormones. This means they have an effect on insulin, which controls blood sugar, leptin and ghrelin, which have an effect on appetite and weight, thyroid, which controls metabolism, energy and mood and also our sex hormones. When you’re able to change the amount of stress in your life, either by removing it or by coping with it in different ways, your adrenals will function better, and the rest of your hormones will often follow.
**Insulin**

Another hormone that is vitally important to your health and well-being is insulin. When insulin is out of balance, the other hormones are easily thrown off course as well. Too much insulin leads to weight gain, low estrogen levels, infertility, mood swings, depression, fatigue, migraine headaches and insomnia.

When you eat carbohydrates, they are broken down into glucose, a form of sugar. Your body knows that too much sugar can damage your brain, so in order to prevent that, insulin opens little places (think of them as lockers in the gym) to store the sugar in the cells of your bloodstream. If you eat too much sweet, starchy food the lockers in your cells get full and insulin can’t open them. Your pancreas compensates by producing more insulin, trying to overcome this *insulin resistance*. The excess insulin has nowhere to go, so it stays in your bloodstream. The blood sugar moves into your fat cells which start to expand and you begin to develop fat, especially around your midsection. If enough blood sugar remains in your bloodstream, you will develop Type 2 diabetes.

Building muscle, rather than fat can help because muscle cells have more room to store blood sugar for later use. Muscle tissue is built through healthy exercise and by getting the right amounts of protein, healthy carbohydrates and healthy fats in your diet. To balance insulin, you also want to reduce you carb intake and focus on those that are less likely to cause high blood sugar, like concentrated sweets, pasta, breads, potatoes, sweet fruits like bananas, mango, papayas and watermelon.

**Thyroid**

Your thyroid regulates your body’s metabolism. This has an enormous effect on your weight, your energy levels and your mood and emotions. If your stress hormones are out of balance, your thyroid will often be affected, too, leading to many other symptoms. Common symptoms of thyroid imbalance include fatigue, depression, weight gain, constipation, intolerance to cold, hair loss, sluggishness. If balancing your stress hormones doesn’t help your symptoms, your health-care practitioner may recommend thyroid supplements, nutritional remedies or medication.
The Sex Hormones

Estrogen, Progesterone, Testosterone, and DHEA are four hormones commonly classified as “sex hormones” but when they’re out of balance, more than sexual health is affected. Estrogen supports our mood and energy, as well as our sexual health. It protects against cardiovascular disease, is involved with body weight and has anti-inflammatory properties. Progesterone is very calming. Men and women both have testosterone; women who are insulin resistant tend to have more testosterone, but not having enough can make it hard to gain muscle mass. DHEA helps us feel good and handle stress effectively. It helps to decrease insulin resistance and with weight loss. People who are low in DHEA often feel sluggish and irritable.

Throughout life, the way our bodies produce hormones changes. For example, prior to menopause, our ovaries make most of our estrogen, but during menopause approximately half of our body’s estrogen and progesterone is made in our adrenals. If our stress levels are high, our adrenals will override the need for the sex hormones and focus on making the hormones needed to fight stress. You can probably see how important hormonal balance is!

As you start thinking about all these symptoms and the possible problems associated with hormones, it’s easy to be confused and maybe even a little overwhelmed. But there is good news! Since many of these hormones work in harmony which each other, when one or more of them gets back in sync, the others are more easily able to regain their normal equilibrium too. There are many natural treatment options that don’t carry the potential for hazardous side effects that are common with prescription medications. Often, by making a few simple changes in diet and lifestyle, problems can be corrected and symptoms can be relieved, naturally and effectively.
Help for Hormones: Naturally

- A few simple changes in diet can help. Choose quality lean proteins, fresh fruits and vegetables and try to reduce carbohydrates.

- When you do eat carbohydrates, make sure they’re low glycemic, gluten-free and high fiber.

- Some healthy carb choices include brown rice, quinoa or gluten free pasta or sweet potatoes.

- At each meal, try to fill half your plate with colorful, non-starchy vegetables.

- Avoid sugar, white or refined flour, junk food, processed sugars and high-fructose corn syrup, artificial sweeteners, additives and preservatives.

- Eat smaller, more frequent meals and snacks.

- Food sensitivities or allergies can sometimes be the source of hormonal upset and you may not even be aware of them. Some common food sensitivities are gluten, dairy, eggs and peanuts.

- A good multivitamin and hormone-healthy supplements can help. Your health care practitioner can recommend specific herbal remedies or nutritional remedies to help your hormones get back on track.

- Accupuncture is sometimes very beneficial for hormone imbalance.

- Make sure you’re getting sufficient sleep and the right amount of exercise. Both are crucial for hormonal health.

- Detox is one of the best things you can do to help get regain hormonal harmony.

- Try to find new ways to deal with everyday stress, be it through meditation, relaxation therapy, yoga or healthy self-talk.

- Try to protect your hormones from environmental toxins and pollutants.

Your hormones are your body’s messengers. They may be sending you some signals that are making you uncomfortable. Listen to what they’re telling you and make a few simple changes that can help to restore balance. You’re worth it!