Unbalanced hormones
Women's World by Dr Nor Ashikin Mokhtar

Hormonal imbalance should not be allowed to continue chronically because it can lead to many irreversible conditions.

HORMONAL conditions are far too common in our population, especially among women. Health disorders caused by hormone imbalance have skyrocketed in the last 35 years, including polycystic ovarian syndrome, diabetes and thyroid conditions.

Other related conditions that are common among women include adrenal fatigue, hormone-linked breast cancer, and worsening symptoms of PMS and perimenopause.

Hormonal health is not a trivial matter. The entire body is regulated by hormones; processes like metabolism, thyroid function, sleep cycles, stress response and many more depend on hormones to continue smoothly.

When the balance of the body’s hormone levels is upset, all the processes involved are adversely affected. Even the slightest change can cause health problems.

Hence, it is important to understand why this is happening and what can be done to prevent it.

In this article, I will discuss the causes and symptoms of the hormonal imbalance epidemic.

Domino effect

The body’s hormones are part of an intricately linked system. They exist in a delicate state of balance, controlled by the hypothalamus gland, which sends and receives messages from hormones throughout the body.

However, the over-production or under-production of one hormone will affect the rest of the hormones, in what is known as a domino effect.

For instance, if the body keeps producing high levels of cortisol, it will lead to decreased production of thyroid-stimulating hormone and thyroid hormone, eventually causing hypothyroidism.

Considering how every function of every cell in the body is interconnected through hormones, it is no surprise that our health and well-being rests on the health of our hormone system.

Causes of hormonal imbalance

The disruption of our hormonal balance is largely due to environmental factors.

Firstly, poor nutrition is a major cause. Compared to previous generations, we are eating far less fresh produce and more processed and pre-packaged food. The latter contains more sugar, preservatives and other chemicals, which directly disrupt the balance of the hormones, particularly insulin. The imbalance of insulin is linked to weight gain and inflammation.
Poor nutrition also has a part to play in menopause symptoms, PMS symptoms, adrenal hormone balance and thyroid health.

Stress seems to be a common keyword in our lives today. This is the second factor in hormonal imbalance, as stress stimulates the adrenal gland to produce cortisol.

When you are under constant stress, the body will produce too much cortisol over time. This upsets the equilibrium of other hormones in the body and can lead to illness.

Finally, our hormones can be disrupted by all the chemicals in the environment, which can be found in food, clothes, household items, furniture, cleaning products and even cosmetics! These products contain certain toxins, also known as endocrine disruptors, because they mimic hormones in the body and upset the balance of these hormones.

**Recognising hormonal imbalance**

Although experts say that hormonal imbalance is becoming increasingly ubiquitous, most women are completely unaware that they are suffering from it.

We tend to think that hormonal symptoms are exclusively the domain of the menstrual cycle, pregnancy and menopause. But weight gain, bloatedness and mood swings only describe a fraction of the conditions that are caused by hormonal imbalance.

Let us look at some of the most common symptoms of hormonal imbalance.

Irregular menstrual periods are a major sign that the hormones controlling menstruation have been disrupted. Oestrogen and progesterone can be affected by an imbalance in other hormones, such as cortisol. That is why stress – which is linked to cortisol production – is said to lead to menstrual problems.

Many women complain of weight gain, but few realise that it has a hormonal basis. Fat storage is regulated by hormones – certain hormones send a message to the body to store fat in the abdominal area, so if the levels of these hormones rise abnormally, it will lead to weight gain.

Mood swings and irritability are probably familiar to most women. These symptoms are linked to sudden changes in the balance of oestrogen, testosterone and progesterone. Some women may also feel out of control, overwhelmed or depressed.

Skin and hair problems are also linked to hormonal imbalance. Some of the symptoms of polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) include adult acne and unusual hair growth, especially facial hair. Imbalance between the levels of oestrogen and testosterone can also cause thinning hair.

Infertility is, without a doubt, a major sign of hormonal imbalance. It is commonly linked to high amounts of androgens (including testosterone) and oestrogen, which adversely affects ovulation.

Finally, chronic fatigue that is not caused by lack of sleep or being overworked is one of the most commonly overlooked symptoms of hormonal imbalance.

It does not help that many women juggle multiple responsibilities at work and at home, and tend to overlook fatigue as an inevitable consequence.

Some ups and downs in our hormone levels are to be expected. However, hormonal imbalance should not be allowed to continue chronically because it can lead to irreversible conditions like PCOS, oestrogen dominance, fibroids, endometriosis, infertility, insulin resistance, weight gain, depression, progesterone deficiency and androgen imbalance.

The biggest mistake made by many women is to assume that hormonal imbalances are part and parcel of being female, or that oestrogen is the only hormone that will give you problems.
This is only true to a certain extent. When you feel that something is “off” or “not right” with your body, chances are it is trying to tell you something is wrong.

In my next article, we will look at tests to measure hormone levels, as well as natural methods to correct hormonal imbalance.

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