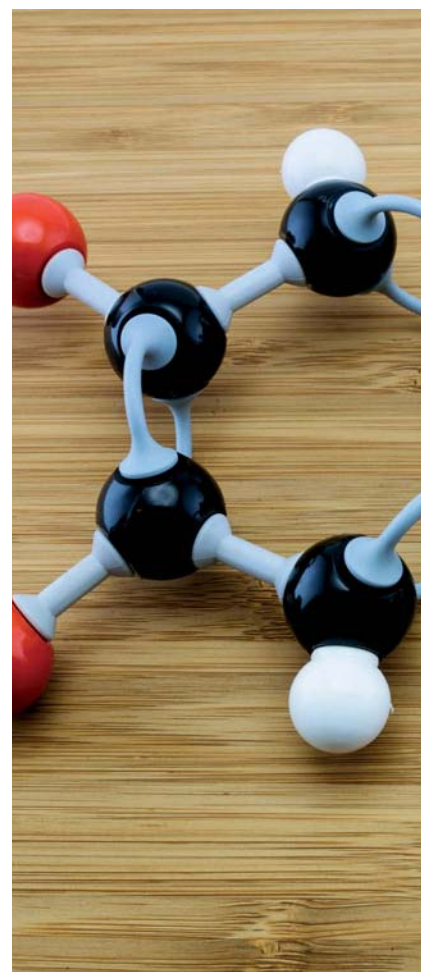


ARE YOUR HORMONES MAKING YOU **FAT?**

You're doing everything "right"—eating healthy foods (and not too much of them), working out, getting a decent amount of sleep, for instance—so why is it that you still don't seem to be making any progress in terms of your health or overall shape? Or worse, feeling even heavier thanks to bloating or a frustrating, seemingly endless plateau? While our lifestyle choices still play the most important role in our health, the culprit behind that pesky unshifting bulge could be hidden in your hormones.

By Yi-Hwa Hanna.



Whether you're on the pill, it's that time of the month, you're suffering from high levels of stress, or just chomping on an easy, quick snack like a biscuit on-the-go, our modern lifestyles aren't just rendering us exhausted—they could also be messing with our hormones, and as a result, causing us to gain weight. Say *what?* That's right—according to experts, hormone imbalance—which can be caused by anything from lifestyle factors to the foods we eat—can mess with our bodies' ability to use up good fats, and let our glands and other bodily functions operate at their best, fuelling undue weight gain.

“Hormones can definitely cause weight gain. Insulin is a hormone known for regulating blood sugar, but too much of it can promote fat storage. Thyroid hormones affect the metabolic rate, and can therefore affect body composition if they are imbalanced. Sex hormones also affect weight gain. The bloating that happens around women's menstrual cycles can be related

to cyclical fluctuations of hormones, and they can be a mixture of water retention, gaseous distention and pelvic congestions. Long-term cortisol production due to stress can cause excess fat storage due to the way it affects insulin, as can long-term oestrogen dominance, since oestrogen (which is found in fat) promotes fat storage, creating a cycle,” explains Dr. Shefali Verma, a GP and Integrative Medical Specialist with a MBChB, MSC in Sports Medicine, degree in Nutritional Therapy, and who is also a Partner and Medical Director for the Institute for Biophysical Medicine in Dubai Healthcare City, and overall hormone guru.

Sounds complicated, doesn't it—but it's such a complex process, all playing into

different factors in how our bodies function like a delicate dance, that to explain it to us at all, Dr. Verma—who is known to many as *the go-to* hormone expert in the UAE—has to really simplify how it all works in order for us to try and start understanding how it all works in one take alone. That's why when patients come into her consultation room, she conducts each and every patient's first meeting with as much depth as possible, asking questions that trickle down to their childhood, and habits they might not even have thought twice about. “The goals of each individual who comes

into my clinic varies. They all, without exception, go through an in-depth history-taking in their first session. It's important for me to get to know them and inquire about everything from birth to the current date. In some cases, information about pregnancy in vivo is relevant to their current issues. Family history is also important. I then determine the appropriate testing required, depending on the case history and goal. My goal is to find out as many clues that will help determine a working hypothesis as to the *cause* of any symptoms presented to me, which allows

Hormones can *cause weight gain, be it insulin, thyroid hormones, or sex hormones—as can* **long-term cortisol production from stress** /



me to create a long-term treatment plan, increasing the effectiveness of the treatment,” she says.

Staying Informed

While hormone imbalance doesn't have a one-size-fits-all answer, there are certain facts about the issue that do apply to all of us—some that, if we're made aware of, could make an immense difference in everything from our weight to our moods, our skin, and how well we sleep at night. Indeed, a recent study from the US-based National Sleep Foundation found that hormonal changes during your monthly cycle can cause insomnia, with experts claiming that progesterone and oestrogen can play a significant role in affecting the amount and quality of our sleep. “Women experience a rise and drop in levels of

oestrogen and progesterone during their menstrual cycles. These hormones are also linked to sleep and circadian cycles and therefore, can influence a woman's sleep pattern as well as the quality of their sleep,” explains Dr. Hiam Ahmed Harfoush, Specialist of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Burjeel Hospital Abu Dhabi.

Despite the fact that the world seems to be on an upward trend of more health-conscious lifestyles, it's an oft-forgotten fact that hormones can have a huge effect on our bodies in so many ways—and that achieving our optimal physical state, be it in how we look or how we function, is about much more than simply eating the right diet or hitting the gym hard or often enough. But fiddling with our hormones isn't a quick fix solution to all of our health problems, either—a

combination of both is essential. “People should be aware of the fact that *both* lifestyle factors *and* hormones affect body composition and health. Because hormonal manipulation is somewhat of a new ‘trend’ and seems like an easy solution, people may dismiss lifestyle factors. However, lifestyles should be heavily considered and taken care of first, before looking into possible hormonal issues,” Dr. Verma says. If there *is* a hormonal issue going on, insulin resistance is the most common problem, she explains. “The more fat tissue one has, the more problems that creates, and the more insulin-resistant they become. This can affect sub-clinical hypothyroidism, which is also quite a big problem. And like I mentioned, this affects people's metabolism and their ability to lose weight. Then there are those hormones such as oestrogen that are stored in fat cells, and so when you have long term oestrogen dominance, you tend to store more fat. Chronically high cortisol can disrupt insulin and can also therefore encourage fat storage,” she continues.

A Delicate Balance

According to Dr. Verma, hyperthyroidism is a major problem when it comes to women and our hormones: “Weight gain, or the inability to lose even on low-calorie diets, is just one of many symptoms of low thyroid hormone production. Other symptoms related to hyperthyroidism include chronic lethargy, thinning or excessive hair loss, depression, infertility and hormonal imbalances, chronic constipation, dry hair and skin, and intolerance to cold temperatures, as well as high levels of triglycerides and cholesterol in the blood. Many women can also develop fullness in the neck due to a goiter—an enlargement of the thyroid gland,” she explains. Another common problem

women experience? Menstrual migraines—this tends to happen around our periods, Dr. Verma explains, and tends to happen in oestrogen-dominant patients since oestrogen is toxic and can cause blood vessels to constrict, leading to headaches. PMS is also generally a result of oestrogen dominance, she says, as are heavy periods, ovarian cysts, polyps and fibroids. And the effects of a hormone imbalance don't just affect our insides—it can cause skin breakouts, too. “Acne can also be hormonal, and is common in [women with] PCOS. The cysts supposedly can produce [their] own DHEA-S, which I elevated in many women with PCOS—this can convert into testosterone and other male hormones, resulting in acne and extra-coarse hair growth,” Dr. Verma says.

Indeed, acne doesn't just stop at our teens—and for many women, one of the reasons why adult acne becomes such a source of frustration is because while we spent our teenage years trying to dry the skin out to get rid of breakouts, those caused by hormonal imbalances are an entirely different animal, requiring entirely different approaches to treatment. And if we don't figure out how to treat it right, we could end up causing more problems than when we started. “Oestrogens affect skin thickness, wrinkle formation, and skin moisture. Oestrogens can increase hyaluronic acid to maintain fluid balance and structural integrity. They can also increase collagen production in the skin, allowing it to remain plump, hydrated and wrinkle-free,” Dr. Verma says. And it's not just our skin—it can affect our hair, too: “Oestrogens also make hair grow long and healthy. Thyroid dysfunction can lead to thinning hair and eventual hair loss,” she explains, continuing: “Again, balance is key when it comes to these hormones. Too much, and skin can become

warm, sweaty and flushed. Too little, and skin becomes dry, coarse, and thick, and even sweating is decreased. Starting in your late 20s, oestrogen levels decline faster than testosterone. Testosterone is an androgenic hormone, which increases masculine qualities (hence the new facial hair) and boosts oil production, plugging your pores and causing blemishes. Small red bumps (not painful, cystic pimples) are more common when you're older, and acne along the jawline or around the mouth are a telltale sign that you're dealing with a hormonal breakout. The epidermis starts losing moisturising hyaluronic acid. The purpose of skin is to act like a barrier—as your face gets drier, it also gets more sensitive," Dr. Verma says.

Finding the Culprits

So what causes these hormonal imbalances? Stress, for one: "Adrenal glands are situated above the kidneys and produce stress hormones. When you are chronically stressed for years on end, or go through very traumatic events, the adrenal glands' production of hormones can be affected. In very layman terms, this can result in any or all hormones being affected. It can result in lower immune systems, triggering chronic diseases, exhaustion and many hormonal dysfunctions. Often, this needs support before any hormonal replacement begins," Dr. Verma says.

Food is another key factor: "Insulin resistance, in most instances, is man-made. Eating too many refined carbohydrates and sugar consistently can impact insulin negatively, in which insulin has to keep being produced to maintain blood sugar balance. Eating a more paleolithic diet can change this significantly. For thyroid issues, it is said that there are certain foods to avoid and are called goitrogens, such as soya, millet, kale, cabbage, turnips, cauliflower, broccoli,



I would not advise self-medicating *even if they were easily available off-the-counter - everyone's physiology is different.* /

brussels sprouts, and peanuts. They are thought to worsen hyperthyroidism and affect conversion into the active hormones. Although I don't advise them to avoided totally, they should ideally be cooked and not eaten in their raw state, and also maybe not be eaten every day. With oestrogen dominance (i.e. patients with PMS, endometriosis, menstrual migraines, breast tenderness before periods, or heavy periods), the same brassica group of vegetables are supposed to help. They help with oestrogen detoxification and decrease the oestrogen burden. Fibre and good digestive function is of utmost importance in patients with oestrogen-dominant

problems," she says.

With many people educating themselves more about food and questioning food production methods, some have developed a fear of certain meats, afraid that their chicken has been pumped full of hormones to help them grow bigger and faster to reduce on costs to manufacturers, for instance—but is buying organic, be it fruit, vegetables or meat, really worth the extra cash? Dr. Verma believes it is, just to be on the safe side. "Eating organic is a good practice in this day. Yes, there is a lot of controversy around 'If it's truly organic' or not, but to me, if you don't try, it definitely *won't* be. Fruit and vegetables are known to be sprayed with

pesticides, which themselves are hard to detoxify when ingested, and they can also act as hormone disruptors. Animal proteins are also [often] injected with hormones and given antibiotics ([these are] usually not labelled and not certified as organic), which should be avoided if one has the financial means to eat organic only. Cows are said to now be milked when they are lactating, and are so full of hormones. Milk is for the baby cows, and is also full of growth factors. Cows are also given antibiotics to prevent infections, but cow milk is also pasteurised. I once read a statistic quoting that pasteurised milk is 150 times more contaminated with



blood, pus and feces than fresh milk. So organic milk, in this case, may be something to go for in the future. When I predominantly worked with patients optimising body composition, I saw a large proportion of men storing more fat in the legs and chest area—resulting in ‘man boobs’. Stopping dairy in many of these patients was enough to significantly change this fat distribution,” Dr. Verma says.

Ironically, while supplements—even natural ones—are often ‘prescribed’ to help combat hormone imbalances, when taken incorrectly, they can also be another potential cause to an imbalance, which is why experts are so adamant that they only be taken under the guidance of a qualified professional. “Zinc, magnesium and vitamin D all support the adrenal glands, and can therefore technically affect all hormones. I often give patients with PMS evening

primrose oil and magnesium, and this has a great effect in a large percentage of patients. There are many thyroid nutrient supplements available that help thyroid hormone production. I often advise on different nutrients and herbs—these can have positive effects on optimising hormones. I have the added benefit of constant monitoring and follow-up of patients, which is essential. As much as it’s ‘safe’, it is safe as long as patients are monitored and followed up. I would not advise people self-medicating, even if they were easily available off-the-counter—everyone’s physiology is different. I always encourage rotation of nutrients and advise weekly days off of supplements,” Dr. Verma explains.

Ok, so you’ve done your due diligence and *still* think you may have an issue with your hormones—or you haven’t the faintest clue if you do or you don’t, but you’d like to find out if what’s messing your body around is thanks to those pesky imbalances. With such a tricky playing field, it can be hard to know where to begin—first things first, Dr. Verma recommends incorporating more sensible lifestyle changes, although she is insistent this be done under the supervision of an expert. If this doesn’t work, then it’s time to look at the broader picture. “In my first consultation, I ask about

eating, sleeping, drinking, bowel and digestive function, family history, medical and past medical history, energy, mood, libido, menstrual history, stress, allergies, exercise history, and more, to get as much information as possible,” she says, explaining that this is necessary in order to get to the “why” behind it all. This is what determines the course of her testing. “You need someone who understands the process of disease, and the problem I’m seeing with speciality driven medicine is that specialists can only see things through their own straw, and not at the wider picture. If a patient says ‘I don’t feel right’ but conventional tests state the patient is well, you can’t ignore their feelings in my opinion—being sick and not feeling ‘well’ are two very different things,” she says.

Being aware of how your body operates and can be affected, and managing your hormones accordingly as best as you can through a healthy lifestyle, is the first step, and the sooner we begin this, the better. “The earlier we tackle hormone imbalances the more we prevent chronic illnesses in the future,” Dr. Verma says, adding: “Women in their 20s are usually just starting to realise what is normal for them. They don’t ask lots of questions unless they are having difficulty conceiving. I see people in their

30s for weight gain, infertility, and loss or thinning of the hair, skin issues, or fatigue. These are the most common ‘hormone-related’ complaints I am talking about. In their 40s, patients can have the same complaints as women in their 30s, but some women also go through premature menopause, lack of libido, and sleep issues, as well as mood issues. Then in the 50s, it’s generally related to menopause and its common symptoms.”

Regardless of your age, one thing we can all start paying attention to? Our insulin levels. “Insulin is the only hormone you have major control over. Its response is mainly determined by what is put in the mouth to ingest. Complex carbohydrates (i.e. oats, quinoa, brown rice and vegetables), foods higher in fibre, are slower to digest and maintain a more sustained blood sugar level, as opposed to simple sugars, resulting in a higher insulin response,” Dr. Verma says. Good gut health is also of utmost importance when it comes to our hormone metabolism, she says, stressing the importance of daily bowel movements and the intake of probiotics to maintain healthy gut ecology, especially when one is on prescribed antibiotics. Paying attention to our food sensitivities can help patients with irritable bowel syndrome or thyroid disease, taking in dietary fibre and water can help with detoxification, regular medical check-ups, and taking steps to tackle stress—“chronic elevated cortisol can play havoc with all hormones,” Dr. Verma says—are all other essential tools in our hormone-balancing belt. And finally, as with most other things related to the human body, education is key to your optimal state and wellness: Knowing your pros and cons, staying well-informed about anything you choose to ingest, and consult an expert if you’re uncertain, and you could finally be on your way to helping your body truly function at its best. ■