

Getting to Know Your Hormones

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Welcome to a quick guide to your hormones! In my practice, I am always amazed at what a big role hormones play in our overall health and how imbalances can affect various organ systems. I have found hormone dysfunction to be at the root of migraines, skin conditions, digestive symptoms, mood and so much more. Sometimes, these imbalances are not obvious, especially if periods are regular and relatively pain free. When women start tracking their cycles alongside their symptoms, we can get a lot of information.

So whether you are trying to conceive, having issues with your cycles, or experiencing symptoms that don't seem overtly gyn- related, I encourage you to explore this guide and get in tuned with what's going on throughout your cycle. Our body gives us cues and we have to listen very carefully. By identifying dysfunction, we can remove barriers to heal and return to optimal wellness!

Getting in tune with your cycle.

Sure, most of us are familiar with cycle tracking apps but do you use them to track ALL your symptoms- be it breast tenderness, increased anxiety, loose stools, migraines, fatigue, etc. I encourage you to start tracking your cycle AND any symptoms that come up throughout the month.

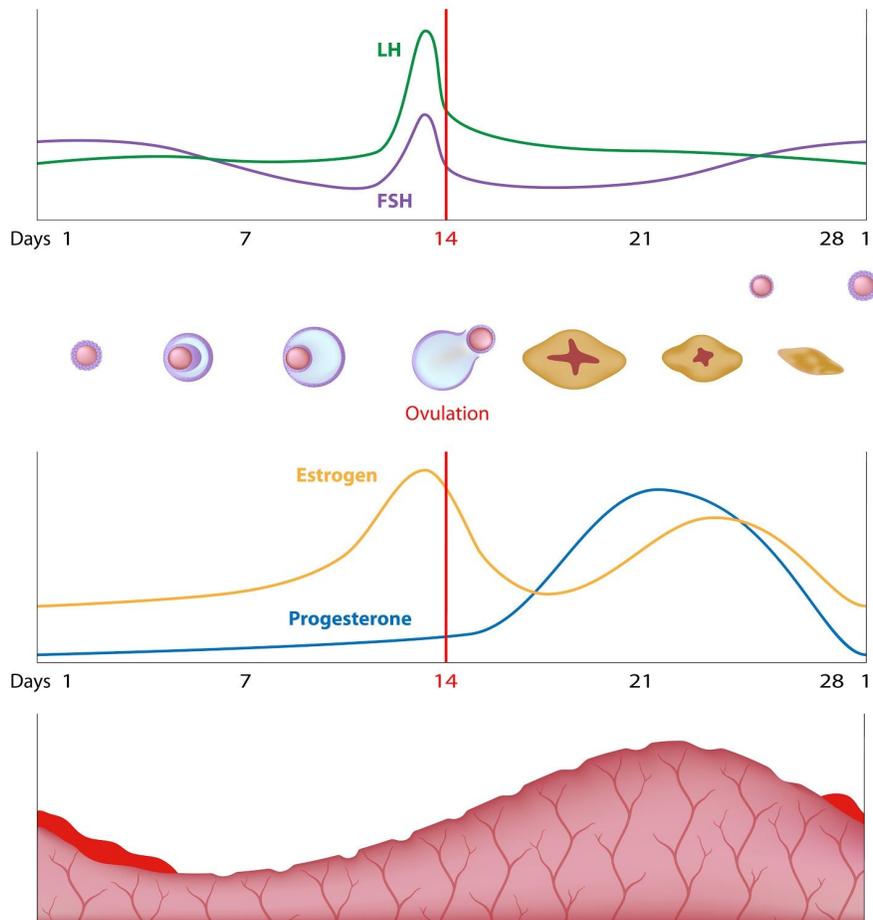
If you want to take an even deeper dive, consider tracking your basal body temperature. This includes taking your temperature every morning before getting out of bed with a basal body thermometer and tracking it on a chart. Our temperature varies throughout the month based on what our hormones are doing. Not sure what it all means? Bring a completed chart to your doctor to start a conversation about your cycle. Below is a picture of a basal body temperature chart. You can download one here:

https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/sites/default/libraries/healthwise/media/pdf/hw/form_zx3020.pdf



Getting to know the hormones.

The endocrine system is a complex network of communication our body uses to carry out all its daily functions. There is constant communication back and forth between our brain and other organs. Hormones, like estrogen and progesterone, are the messages being sent. Let's start by learning a little about our menstrual cycle.



If this diagram feels very overwhelming, I get it. It is what makes us women such complex creatures! But hang in there with me, it will all make sense soon.

The follicular phase:

The menstrual cycle starts on “day 1.” This is the first day of your period. During this time, the body has detected there is not a pregnancy, and we begin to shed the lining of our endometrium (the inside of our uterus) to get ready to try again for pregnancy. Even if

you don't have any desire to become pregnant, your body is preparing for it each month. At this phase of your cycle estrogen and progesterone are low.

During this time, a hormone called FSH, or follicle stimulating hormone is released from the brain. It tells the ovaries to start maturing follicles, one of which will become the dominant follicle and future egg for ovulation. This is why the first half of the cycle is called the "follicular phase." It is spent getting follicles ready for ovulation.

As the follicle grows, estrogen slowly starts to rise and rebuild the endometrium. It is making a cozy home for a future fertilized egg to get comfortable and stay a while.

Ovulation:

Ovulation generally occurs right smack in the middle of the cycle, around day 14, and is the event that divides the cycle in half. But we are not textbooks ladies! And the day of ovulation can be different for everyone.

When the brain hears estrogen getting high, it releases a hormone called LH or luteinizing hormone. This tells the ovaries to release the egg, or ovulate. Once the ovary releases an egg it is able to be fertilized by sperm.

The luteal phase:

The luteal phase is the second half of the menstrual cycle, generally between days 14 and 28. After we have ovulated, progesterone and estrogen rise to prepare for a possible pregnancy. Adequate progesterone levels during this time are essential in maintaining a healthy pregnancy. Low progesterone levels can be a common cause of PMS, irregular cycles, miscarriage and much much more.

If the body has not detected a pregnancy, estrogen and progesterone levels begin to fall. This drop in hormones is what triggers the next period. And the cycle continues until we reach menopause.

Identifying Common Hormone Imbalances

Hormone imbalances can present in a number of different ways. And while no two women are exactly the same in their presentation, there are some themes that go along with having too much or too little of a hormone. Below is a list of these symptoms and the hormone they are associated with.

Too much estrogen:

- Irritability, angry, anxiety
- PMS
- Brain fog
- Tendency to gain/ carry weight in hips, butt, and thighs.
- Heavy or painful periods
- Fibroids
- Endometriosis

Too little estrogen:

- Low libido
- hot flashes
- Vaginal dryness
- Depression/ anxiety
- Recurrent bladder infections.

Too little progesterone:

- PMS
- Anxiety
- Insomnia
- Headaches around period
- Restless legs

Too much testosterone:

- Acne
- Hair growth on face, chest, abdomen
- Thinning hair
- PCOS
- Trouble getting pregnant.

I hope this packet will help you identify the root cause of your health concerns. Figured it out but don't know where to begin? Take the information to your naturopathic doctor to have a deeper conversation about how to start addressing your symptoms!