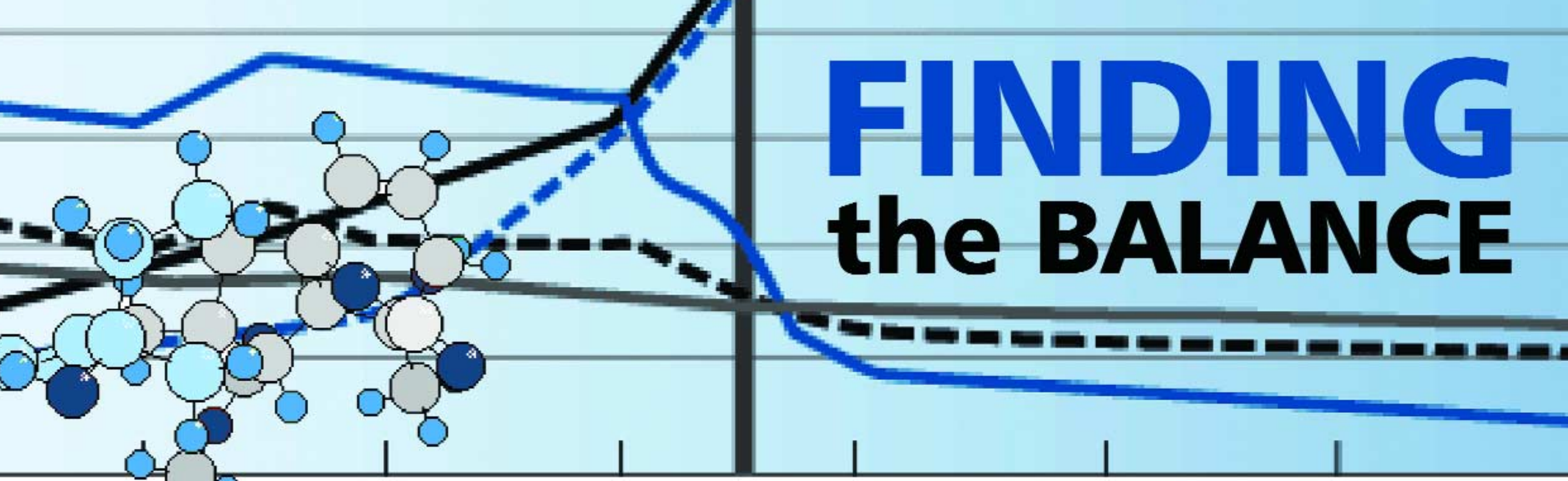


FINDING the BALANCE

As they age, many women search for a solution to replace the hormones their systems are no longer producing. Natural hormone balance therapy can help women reclaim themselves.

by Chavah Jacobs

A twenty-eight-year-old woman from Ramat Beit Shemesh suffered from severe post-partum depression following the birth of her second child. She managed to take care of her new baby and her toddler, but she could not manage anything else. She paid less attention to personal grooming, felt tired all day, rarely had dinner on the table when her husband came home, and never had energy to do any housework. The only thing that made her feel better, temporarily, was eating. But the more weight she gained, the worse she felt, until she reached a point of waking up every morning wishing she did not exist anymore.

A fifty-seven-year-old woman from Los Angeles found herself experiencing a host of unpleasant symptoms, including night sweats and hot flashes. Her skin seemed to get drier and thinner each day, and as time went on she found herself experiencing extreme fatigue. Additionally, she could not seem to remember things she used to remember easily, like people's names and phone numbers. Furthermore, when her doctor recommended running a routine test of her bone density, he found that she was suffering from mild osteoporosis.

A thirty-year-old Jeruslem woman had been married for four years. After her first birth within a year of her marriage, she faced secondary infertility, and suffered from two early miscarriages within three years. She was constantly battling a weight problem. Much to her embarrassment, her facial complexion changed dramatically. She lived in dread of losing her tweezers.

The root of all these women's medical problems was the same: a hormone imbalance. Post-partum depression is brought on by a sudden drop in progesterone after birth, combined with situational stress. The woman from Los Angeles suffered from excess estrogen, common for women over forty. The woman from Jerusalem suffered from a condition called Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, which results from an overload of male hormones, in addition to a progesterone deficiency. These are just a small sampling of possible medical problems that arise from imbalanced hormones. Men are not immune to this problem either, and many of the medical troubles faced by men as they age are rooted in either too few male hormones or too many female hormones.

Understanding Hormones

When most people are asked, "What is a hormone?" they have difficulty providing an answer. Hormones are special chemicals produced by various glands in the body in order to accomplish specific tasks. To understand what hormones do in general, picture this: four keys and four locks, each one a different color. When the red key is put into the red lock, a light turns on. When the blue key is put into the blue lock, a fan starts. When the green key is put into a green lock, the light now turns off. When the orange key is put into the orange lock, the fan stops. The hormone is a key, and at a cellular level there are receptors, which are the locks. A hormone will be created in one part of the body (in the pituitary gland, adrenal gland, or thyroid gland, for example), and then will travel throughout the body, via the blood, until it finds a receptor. Upon finding the proper receptor, the hormone binds itself to that receptor, and together they bind to a certain stretch of DNA in the center (nucleus) of the cell, to either stimulate (turn on) or suppress (turn off) cellular activity.

Within the human body there are over thirty types of hormones, secreted by twelve different glands, which help to orchestrate and regulate many bodily functions, such as hunger and fullness, sleep, body temperature, digestion, body shape, height, and stress management — this includes how much adrenaline is released in an emergency situation.

When it comes to postpartum depression, polycystic ovaries, infertility, and other problems that appear with aging, the hormones at play are estrogens, progesterone, androgens, and adrenal hormones. They all affect the development and growth of male and female characteristics. Most men can grow a beard, and some have what's called "male pattern baldness," because of their androgens; most women can bear children because of estrogen and progesterone.

How Imbalances Occur

Hashem created the human body in such a way that, if treated properly, it will stay perfectly balanced on a chemical level. Unfortunately, in this modern world, many people have difficulty treating their bodies correctly. **Mishpacha** talked with Dr. Yisroel Yaffa, a family physician, who has in the past seven years become a leading authority in Israel for the treatment of hormonal imbalances.

■ Why are so many people suffering from hormonal imbalances today?

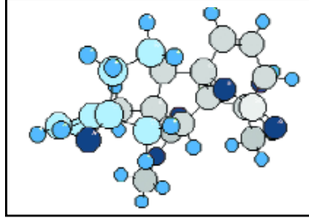
"We are living in a bath of estrogen. Not only is it made in the body but we eat and drink chemical estrogens in our foods. Estrogen is injected into dairy cows so that they produce more milk and estrogen is injected into beef cows and chickens so they hold water, so that they weigh more and bring more money per kilo. When we eat dairy or meat or chicken we are not only ingesting the animal's hormones but also the injected chemical hormones.

"Additionally, fruits and vegetables are sprayed with chemicals that work in the body like estrogen, called xenoestrogen. The chemicals in our lives can possibly put our estrogen levels into the danger zone."

■ Is estrogen a bad thing?

"No. Both men and women need estrogen to function properly. But we don't want too much of it, because too much estrogen is a problem. However, many of the problems stemming from estrogen can easily be fixed by another hormone: progesterone. Progesterone comes from the adrenal glands, but its main source is the corpus luteum, a structure produced monthly by most adult women. The corpus luteum is a progesterone factory.

"Someone with too much estrogen is called 'estrogen dominant.' This term was coined twenty years ago by Dr. John Lee, who pioneered the field of human-identical hormones. Some of the negative side effects of estrogen dominance include thyroid problems, anxiety, depression, migraines, arthritis, weight gain, fluid retention, and even cancer. Progesterone acts against every single one of those. It helps the thyroid function. It protects against the cancers to which women are specifically susceptible. It works against blood clots. It causes relaxation and helps ▸▸▸



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diffuse anxiety. The corpus luteum gives out twenty-five milligrams of progesterone a day (for roughly twelve to sixteen days a month), and that's normally enough to balance out the estrogen."

■ What does progesterone do?

"Progesterone has two very important jobs. First, it promotes gestation; it helps a person bear children.

"Secondly, progesterone is the hormone that stimulates bone growth. If there is no progesterone, then bones cannot maintain their strength. Correcting the hormonal imbalance that comes with osteoporosis can bring the bones back to their natural strength without medication."

"Once a woman hits her mid-thirties, she starts having months in which she does not produce a corpus luteum, which means that she hardly produces any progesterone, the great balancer, that month. Then, at some point, when she reaches her forties or fifties, she stops producing a corpus luteum permanently. At that point, she can become really out-of-balance. Even though she no longer creates a corpus luteum or progesterone monthly, her body is still churning out the estrogen, albeit about fifty percent less. This puts women at risk."

■ Did women in the past suffer as much from the changes experienced upon aging as women do nowadays?

"In my opinion, it wasn't Hashem's intention for women to suffer when they age. Take yourself to a Third World country, where people don't have much money for anything, and they certainly don't have chemicals in their dairy, in their meat, and on their fruits and vegetables. Now, as a woman in that Third World country ages, her estrogen output eventually falls to about fifty percent, as I mentioned before. That means she needs less progesterone for balance. Older women don't make the corpus luteum but their adrenal glands, if they are healthy, compensate by making more hormones. Do you know how people burn out their adrenal glands? Wheat, sugar, staying up late, coffee, or caffeine in cola and other drinks. All these things burn out the adrenal gland. Then, when a person requires a little more progesterone later on in life, the adrenal gland can't produce it. In that Third World country, when the sun goes down, they don't have too many electric lights, so they go to sleep early. When they wake up, they are well-rested and their bodies are functioning well. They don't drink caffeine and sugar. Not only that, but they're eating lots of green vegetables, that grow from the ground, and the body can use green vegetables to produce progesterone. We don't eat enough of these vegetables, and with the toxic burden of too much estrogen, it's hard to make up the balance. In Third World countries, women don't experience hot flashes and night sweats. Their adrenal glands and green vegetables make enough progesterone to balance out their estrogen, even at a later stage in life."

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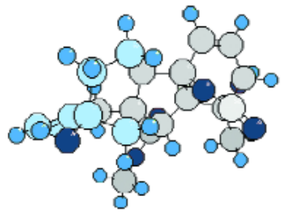

Synthetic Hormone Replacement Therapy

For the last forty years, as women have tried various hormone replacement therapies, up to one hundred million women have ingested toxic forms of estrogen and progestin (a chemical that acts like progesterone in the body but is not progesterone), resulting in a higher incidence of cancer and cardiovascular diseases. A study by the Women's Health Initiative, an American government agency which falls under the umbrella of the National Institutes of Health, Department of Health and Human Services, found that women taking a drug called Prempro (a combination of estrogen with progestin) had a twenty-six percent increased risk of developing women's cancer, a twenty-nine percent increased risk of having a heart attack, a forty-one percent increased risk of having a stroke, and a 100 percent increased risk of developing a blood clot in the lungs (called a pulmonary embolism). The results were so alarming that in July 2002 the study was stopped prematurely. It had become clear that the risks exceeded the benefits. In another studying involving estrogen alone (a medication called Premarin, which is made from the urine of a pregnant horse), the researchers found an increased risk in strokes, blood clots, and cognitive functions. Again the risks were shown to exceed the benefits, and this study was also stopped prematurely.

Doctors have been prescribing these types of drugs for four decades. But doctors themselves don't always have a total picture, as most of their information about any given medication comes from the pharmaceutical company producing it, via sales representatives (approximately 90,000 people in the United States), advertising campaigns, studies funded by the drug company, and seminars also funded by the drug company. The pharmaceutical companies producing these synthetic hormones have made billions of dollars from their sales. They are very much interested in protecting their own interests, even at the expense of women's health.

Dr. Yaffa explains the problem with synthetic hormones: "Let's say a woman has too little progesterone. Wouldn't it make sense that when her doctor realizes that she is deficient in a certain hormone, that she is given the exact replica of the hormone which her body naturally produces? The problem is that the drug companies don't want to produce hormones which are identical to the ones in your body, because you can't put a patent on something designed by Hashem."

Dr. Yaffa describes how the drug companies "create" instead a synthetic, chemical hormone that produces the same reaction as progesterone, but has a different structure, calling it progestin or progestigen, which can lead to some serious illnesses.

■ What is wrong with progestin?

"The drug companies told us for forty years that their chemicals would help us and not harm us. It's true that we did get lots of symptomatic relief, but the body cannot break down the foreign chemical structure of their hormones. This can lead to a build-up of toxins. Add that to a few other risk factors and now you can understand what the uproar is concerning chemical hormones. After these toxins have been building up for a few years they start causing diseases, like women's cancers, heart attacks, strokes, and blood clots. In the United States, there is now a black box warning on all of these synthetic hormones, just like on cigarette boxes. Here in Israel, there is no such warning."

Human-identical Hormones

For those who are hormonally imbalanced, there is one safe option: human-identical, or bio-identical hormones. As the name implies, human-identical hormones look exactly the same as the hormones produced naturally by the human body, but they have been synthesized in a laboratory using pharmaceutical-grade products. Human-identical hormones are not herbs that someone can buy over-the-counter. These hormones are prescribed by a doctor and compounded by a knowledgeable pharmacist in an exact manner which meets the specific needs of the patient. Human-identical hormones have been used safely for twenty years by doctors around the world.

The use of human-identical hormones is slowly gaining mainstream popularity in the United States, but still lacks respect in the medical community as a whole. The biggest obstacle to widespread acceptance of human-identical hormones is the lack of proper data supporting the claims of efficacy and safety made by the doctors using them, of which there are plenty. A study is considered reliable if it is random, double-blind, and placebo-controlled. This type of study would cost millions of dollars. Since drug companies cannot patent human-identical hormones, they have no interest in sponsoring such a study.

In a randomized clinical trial, a group of patients with similar traits are divided by chance into two separate groups. For example, if a group of doctors wanted to study bio-identical progesterone, they might take a group of 5,000 women between the ages of forty and fifty, suffering from estrogen dominance. They would then randomly assign each woman into one of two groups. The first group would receive a cream to apply topically containing human-identical progesterone, and the second group would receive a cream that looked exactly like the first one, but lacked the human-identical progesterone. Now, to make it double-blind, neither the researchers nor the patients would know who was using the real cream and who was using the placebo. The results of such a test would be considered scientifically sound and reliable.

Even though no such large-scale test has been done with bio-identical hormones, there have been numerous studies with small sample sizes that have provided encouraging results. One retrospective study that involved 100 patients, from a particular clinic, showed a much higher rate of success (statistically significant improvement for twenty-four out of thirty-seven symptoms of hormonal imbalance) than that of traditional hormone therapy. Another large and well-controlled study showed that estrogen combined with natural progesterone produced the most favorable increases in HDL (good cholesterol) levels, but the study's main focus was the effect of hormonal replacement therapy on the risk of women's heart disease. Besides this, there have been many other small studies worldwide indicating favorable results.

Even though human-identical hormones lack widespread acceptance in the medical community, there are many good reasons for believing bio-identical hormones to be the best way to treat hormonal imbalances. First, the theory of human-identical hormones is logical: it makes sense to replace the missing hormones with an exact replica of what is missing (rather than hormones derived from the urine of pregnant horses). Second, there have been numerous small-scale studies that have produced positive results. Third, there are many success stories coming out of private practices. All of these lead to the conclusion that human-identical hormones are both safe and effective.

There are a growing number of doctors turning to human-identical hormones as a viable option in the United States and in Europe.

Dr. Yaffa has been a family physician for over twenty years, but at the beginning of his career he never imagined he'd be an expert in complementary medicine. "Before moving to Israel, I had a busy medical practice in New Jersey and was on staff at three hospitals. At that time I knew very little about nutrition and vitamins, subjects not covered in medical school."

That changed quickly and unexpectedly. The Yaffas were on their way to fulfilling their dream of making aliyah. But two weeks before their flight to Israel, their three-year-old son was diagnosed with cancer.

"One day, while our son was involved in his year-long treatment at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, I noticed something funny: when the oncologist left the room, the Asian parents secretly gave their children different potions. Needless to say, I was intrigued. Upon inquiring about the potions, I learned that they were nutrients being given in order to complement the standard medical care. This made a lot of sense to me, so I began consulting with the most famous MDs, PhDs, NDs, and pharmacists who had been working in the alternative medicine field for decades. They took me under their wing, and taught me how to supplement my child's treatment. That experience began my second career in complementary medicine. Baruch Hashem, our son is now a healthy ten-year-old, and is still taking lots of supplements."

Dr. Yaffa first heard about human-identical hormones during his initial introduction to complementary medicine. "However," he says, "I didn't realize until about five years ago that this healthy approach for reestablishing health did not exist in Israel. At that time, an American friend of mine, living in Israel, asked me to renew a prescription she had been taking in the United States for human-identical hormones. This friend had been unable to find a doctor in Israel who would renew the prescription. Seeing the void, I took it upon myself to 'spread the word.' Seeing such positive results from human-identical hormones, I have been emphasizing that part of my medical care."

Diagnosis and Treatment

Dr. Yaffa is unique in Israel both for his use of human-identical hormones, and for his manner of diagnosing hormonal imbalances. He explains, "What I do is test for the hormones in a way that shows the level of active hormones, the hormones that are doing all the work. Blood tests, the usual manner of diagnosis, measure the active and the inactive hormones together. Lumping together active and inactive hormones gives an inaccurate picture of what is actually happening in the body. However, testing the saliva for hormones has been a tremendous breakthrough in finding hormonal imbalances. It has been proven medically that the saliva contains only active hormones. Once the hormonal imbalance has been determined accurately, I prescribe human-identical hormones, whichever ones are specifically needed, and put together a personalized program which could include changes in a person's diet and lifestyle, in addition to vitamins and herbs."

Practical Advice

What can people do on a daily basis to help keep their hormones balanced? According to Dr. Yaffa, "The answer is to try to live a balanced lifestyle. Try to get to sleep on time. Don't rely on caffeine, white flour, and sugar for your energy. Try to increase your water, fruit, vegetable, and healthy protein intake. Recognize the signs of hormonal imbalance, and seek care as an educated consumer." ■

Dr. Yaffa can be contacted through Mishpacha Magazine.