

VIP SEEN

TRI-CITIES

TAMING YOUR INNER BRIDEZILLA

The Effect of Stress on Hormones

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Stressed? Overwhelmed? Overextended? If you are, you are certainly not alone. In fact for the vast majority of women seen in our Women's Health Clinic, these culprits seem to be common denominators. But could the stress actually be the cause of hormones becoming out of balance? Why certainly! In fact, STRESS is the most prevalent cause of hormonal imbalance in young women in their 20s and 30s.

Here's how it works. Imagine for a moment; two mason jars sitting on a table. They have little cute Pinterest-inspired labels on each one. One reads: Progesterone. The other: Cortisol. Do you have the mental image? Now imagine that they are both filled with water almost to the top. I guess we should stop here and clue you in about why these hormones are important. Progesterone has many functions in the body including tightly controlling energy, memory, mood, sleep and even libido. Cortisol, in the second jar, is your main stress hormone. It is produced by the adrenal glands (small walnut shaped glands that rest above the kidneys). It is produced in response to stress.

It goes a little something like this. Close your eyes and take a moment to imagine your absolute biggest stress at this point in your life. Got it? Maybe it is your work, your children, a broken relationship, family or finances; perhaps it is worry or concern for another person that is weighing you down. Who knows, maybe it is wedding planning? Whatever it is, when confronted with stress, the body responds by producing more cortisol (the main stress hormone) to help you deal with and meet the demands of the stressor. You see, cortisol is a very stimulating hormone (which is why we often have trouble falling asleep when we have something on our mind). It is meant to help us through stressful situations and is vital to our overall well-being and the way in which we handle ourselves under stress.

So, in walks stress. The cortisol jar begins to overflow. This is positive in that your body is providing you what you need to meet the demands of the stress. This helps prevent a nervous breakdown, which is always a plus. Now, what should happen is when the stress is over (like an argument with your spouse, for example) the cortisol stops being overproduced and returns to a normal level. But what happens if the cortisol jar is running over all the time? A huge mess on the table, right? Where does all of the excess go? Well in your body, it is stored as belly fat. Yep. Weight gain in the midsection...the dreaded muffin top! You've always been able to maintain control over your weight when it has crept up in the past, but now nothing is working. Over a prolonged period of time, those poor little adrenal glands become tired and can't keep up with the constant strain. The continuous production of cortisol to help deal with life stresses leads to overworked, overused adrenal glands. And just like most anything that is overworked, eventually they become exhausted! The result...someone that still has stress but no longer has what they need to adequately bounce back or deal with it. By the way, when this happens, down goes the sex drive. Testosterone and progesterone are produced not only in the ovaries, but also in the adrenals as well. You are now fatigued, especially when waking up in the morning and after lunch. The things that used to slide right off our back are now getting under your skin. Your patience is running thin. You're irritable, not to mention the added body fat as a result of the constant overproduction of cortisol has really gotten you down. You may have even considered that you could benefit from an antidepressant at this point. You do not feel like yourself.

So, back to the table with the two mason jars. One filled with water representing progesterone; the other filled with water representing cortisol. Except now the cortisol jar is almost empty. Yikes! Well, if it wasn't for the fact that we

would die within seven days without cortisol, we could just keep on feeling tired and irritable and the heck with the empty jar. Instead, we are fearfully and wonderfully made! The body compensates by essentially “borrowing from Peter to pay Paul”. The progesterone jar (which controls energy, memory, mood, sleep, and libido) is still full, remember? The body will take progesterone and make cortisol out of it in an attempt to keep the cortisol jar full. Imagine if I poured most all of the contents out of the progesterone jar into the almost empty cortisol jar. This sounds good, right? Well, yes if the goal is simply to stay alive and avoid a nervous breakdown. It is done at the expense of progesterone whose tank is now almost empty. This is a genuine quality of life problem, given that it closely controls your mood, energy, memory, sex drive and sleep. Sound familiar?

This, my friends, is how stress can wreak havoc on your hormonal balance. You are now living with progesterone deficiency (low progesterone) that is rarely diagnosed simply because the patient often seems too young to have a hormonal imbalance or perhaps standard blood tests reveal that everything is within range. Because salivary hormone test panels have the ability to look more deeply and differentiate between which hormones are active and working and those that are inactive, it is easy to detect hidden hormonal imbalances using this testing modality. Salivary testing is the gold standard for cortisol as well, as evidenced in numerous clinical studies. Treatment is individualized but often includes natural adrenal support, next page specific nutrients, lifestyle modifications, nutrition, exercise, yoga and/or natural bio identical hormones that are customized to fit each patient’s individual needs.

So, if you start to see the emergence of BrideZilla rearing her ugly head, take heed and don’t forget...stress CAN change your hormones. P.S. A good night’s sleep helps build cortisol for the next day as well as progesterone, so try being in bed by 10:00 p.m., get your beauty sleep...for more reasons than one, your body will love you for it. Guaranteed.