

# the report:

As the latest buzzword, it is tempting to make hormones the scapegoat for all our ailments. Kathleen Baird-Murray looks at the evidence and finds out how to keep your invisible armor at its strongest

failure in their late twenties. “When I went to medical school over 30 years ago, the average age of menopause was 55,” she says. “Now it is 48.”

According to Dr. Sara Gottfried ([saragottfriedmd.com](http://saragottfriedmd.com)), the interest hormones are garnering is long overdue. “Hormones are currently only addressed at particular moments in our life, such as menopause, or when we are trying to conceive, when in fact they need to be constantly fine-tuned,” she says. And yet this is something that is easier said than done. Considering our endocrine system has been with us since before birth, it is surprising how hard it is to tell when it is our hormones making us feel unwell, often because the symptoms mask any underlying problems. “Every woman has a hormonal imbalance at certain points in her life,” says Dr. Gluck. “But she might not always recognize it as such. Women nowadays have been on the contraceptive pill for long periods

From the extreme, newsworthy headlines redolent of film noir, to the kind of gently niggling symptoms that affect us all – feeling lethargic, or unexplained weight gain – it seems our largely ignored endocrine system is finally getting the attention it deserves. And while much can be dismissed as scaremongering – the fad for human growth hormones, for example, in which peptide hormones that stimulate cell regeneration are illegally sold under the counter to Hollywood stars obsessed with looking younger, all the while ignoring the need for safety tests – it is those smaller concerns that are more likely to affect us all.

In fact, hormones have been hitting the headlines for all sorts of reasons lately, it is just that we haven’t always attributed them as the cause. Diabetes, caused by a hormone imbalance that makes cells numb to insulin, is set to increase dramatically by 2030, with China, India and America the countries forecast to have the highest rates. Thyroid problems – when your thyroid doesn’t produce enough thyroxine, which gives us the energy we need to function properly – are also on the increase. Dr Sara Gottfried, whose book *The Hormone Cure* became a *New York Times* bestseller, says 20 per cent of the American population is affected. As for the menopause – according to Dr. Marion Gluck, a bio-identical hormone specialist based at Grace Belgravia, London ([gracebelgravia.com](http://gracebelgravia.com)), there has been an alarming increase in the number of women suffering from an early menopause or ovarian

*It’s a dark night* in a cobbled London mews, and a whispered conversation is taking place. A cosmetic surgeon visiting from Los Angeles is talking to friends about the latest Hollywood craze for hormones-with-everything. “There’s all this talk about hormone supplementation being good for you,” he says. “But I know for a fact these guys are dishing out human growth hormone pills like they’re sweets. There’s going to be a lot of people getting some strange illnesses in the next few years...”

Cut to the Harley Street offices of a hormone specialist. Amid the dark furniture, the pot plants and the cream carpets, a well-dressed forty-something woman complains of feeling exhausted; she is not losing her post-baby weight like she thought she would, and is it normal to be finding her husband less attractive these days? She is here because a friend of a friend, in fact, *all* her friends of friends, have heard there is a pill you can take that fixes your hormones, gives you back the body you once had. She seems almost disappointed when blood tests reveal there is nothing majorly wrong with her hormones – her fatigue is part and parcel of being a modern working mother. The cure? There is no magic pill to fix her slightly off-kilter hormones, but rather she needs to explore lifestyle changes.

And yet, if we are unable to make these sorts of life changes, then doesn’t reducing stress by monitoring our hormone balance suddenly become a very positive choice to make – rather than a symptom of modern-day neurosis?

of time, and they are also exposed to a lot of xenoestrogens (rogue compounds that mimic estrogen and have been linked to breast cancer), which can be found in lots of household products.”

Dr. Gluck says that even doctors can have a hard time recognizing the cause. “A patient might say, ‘I’m depressed, my hair is thin, my skin is dry’, and a blood test is done, but if it does not present within a specific reference range, a case of hormone imbalance might be missed.” She worked for years in developing countries and found that in the absence of blood tests, she became more reliant on the symptoms. “The references are there to give us guidelines, but they are too black and white,” she says.

But while diagnosis might be the first step, not everyone agrees on the best methods of treatment. Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), should it be prescribed, comes down to two choices: conventional hormones aimed at topping up or replacing the ones our body has lost, or bio-identical plant-derived hormones. The former were frowned upon following the 2002 *Women’s Health* Initiative study, but this was later condemned for being alarmist and HRT is now regularly and safely prescribed again. Bio-identical hormones, which are molecules identical to hormones, and are usually plant-derived (as prescribed by doctors like Gluck and Gottfried) are often touted as the natural alternative, but they remain controversial. Crucially, they are yet to receive FDA approval and are condemned by the US Endocrine Society for claiming to be more effective than traditional hormones.

The good news is, for most of us, there is much that can be done to redress hormonal imbalances without resorting to HRT – something that both endocrinologists and bio-identical hormone specialists agree on. Dr. Thierry Pache, an endocrinologist specializing in gynecology, based at the Clinique La Prairie in Switzerland ([laprairie.ch](http://laprairie.ch)), favors the more conventional hormone cures, but often starts

with alternatives, depending on diagnosis. “I often suggest they see an acupuncturist, look at their diet, and take the vitamin supplement Cimicifuga, which helps 60 per cent of myestrogen-deficientfemalepatients,” says Dr. Pache. He adds that, for example in cases of low libido, often the problem is not just about hormone levels, but is emotional or stress-related. “Many of my patients don’t need to be prescribed hormones,” he says. In other words, and somewhat annoyingly, this time round there may not be a magic pill to fix things. Like the friends-of-friends in the Harley Street clinic, no doubt we will keep searching, but in the meantime there are a whole host of things we can do ourselves first.

**the symptom:** The weight not dropping off as easily as it used to.

**the culprit:** Take your pick from (potentially) any of the seven hormones that affect our metabolism: cortisol, estrogen, thyroid, insulin, leptin, testosterone and growth hormone. The stress hormone cortisol,

in particular, is fatal if you are trying to lose weight – high levels make it more difficult to burn fat – while leptin, the satiety hormone that tells us when we feel full, also plays an important role. “Lack of sleep reduces the levels of leptin production by a third,” says Dr. Chris Idzikowski at the renowned Edinburgh Sleep Centre ([edinburghsleepcentre.com](http://edinburghsleepcentre.com)). “As a result, you may find yourself consuming roughly 900 calories a day more than you need, in order to feel full.” Lack of sleep also impairs insulin response, leading to rising blood sugar. During healthy sleep, the blood glucose levels rise, so levels of the hormone insulin also rise in order to move excess glucose out of the blood and store it as glycogen in the cells. **the cure:** Yoga and interval training will help improve your

metabolism, as well as give you a better night’s sleep, but also avoid alcohol, which raises cortisol and slows metabolism. And take a look at your overall diet. “Some simple ways to reset your hormones include dropping gluten and dairy,” suggests Dr. Gottfried, who recommends eating 40-50g of fiber a day to remove xenoestrogens from your system.

**the symptom:** Restless nights, poor sleep.

**the culprit:** The growth hormone is essential for overall health and the secretion of it peaks during deep sleep, so prolonged sleep deprivation means our repair system will not work properly. Also, resist that sugary snack before bedtime – it will increase your cortisol levels, causing those frustrating periods of over-active thinking during the night.

**the cure:** Dr. Gottfried recommends the herb Valerian instead of sleeping pills; and turn off all electronic devices as the blue light they emit inhibits the release of melatonin.

“There is much that can be done to prevent and even redress hormonal imbalances without resorting to HRT”

**the symptom:** Stress and anxiety spinning into overdrive.

**the culprit:** Cortisol. “A late night means cortisol levels remain high the next evening, making it harder to fall asleep and creating a vicious cycle,” says Dr. Idzikowski. **the cure:** “Eating a diet that promotes gut health is crucial for hormone health,” says Dr. Alejandro Junger, a New York cardiologist and detox specialist ([cleanprogram.com](http://cleanprogram.com)). Dr. Gottfried favors omega-3 supplements: “It is a miracle food. It lowers cortisol and keeps your metabolism humming.”