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NUTRITION & NATUROPATHY



*Happy*

**MENSTRUAL  
CYCLE**

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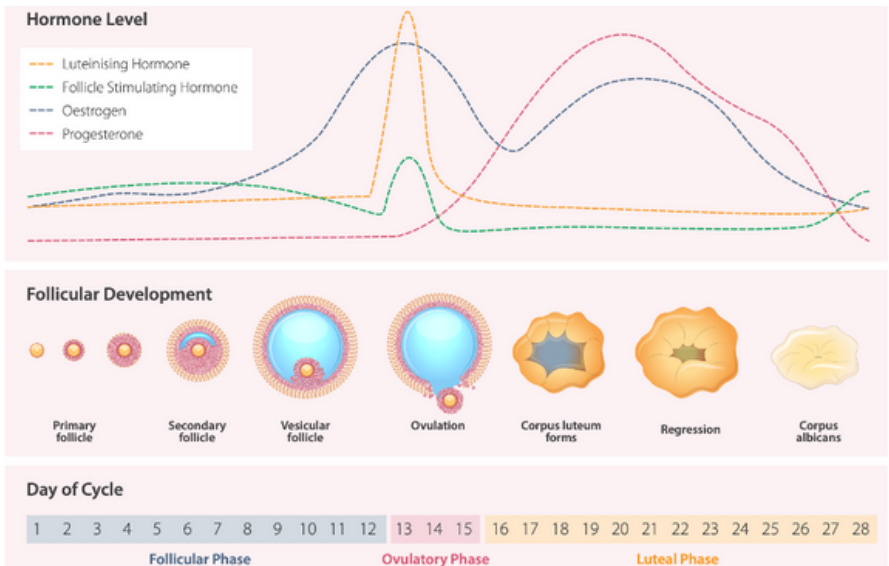
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# What is a healthy Menstrual Cycle

The 'menstrual cycle' is the term used to describe the natural hormonal and physical changes that occur in order to prepare healthy eggs (ova) within the ovaries, and develop the lining of a woman's uterus in preparation for pregnancy.

The average menstrual cycle occurs every 28 to 32 days, with day one of your menstrual cycle considered to be the first day of established bleeding. The timing of a healthy cycle is dependent on three important events:

- The Follicular Phase** - the first phase of your cycle during which time follicles (sacs which contain an egg) in the ovary begin to mature. This phase typically lasts from days 1 to 14.
- Ovulation** - occurs once the dominant follicle has reached maturity in the ovary, following which time the egg is released and enters the fallopian tube ready to travel to the uterus. This ideally occurs between days 13, 14 or 15.
- The Luteal Phase** - the final stage of your cycle during which time your uterus lining becomes thicker in preparation for a fertilised egg. If the egg is not fertilised, the uterus lining breaks down, resulting in menstruation. This phase occurs from days 16 to 28. The cycle then begins again.



# Common Menstrual Issues

Some of the menstrual and hormonal conditions women commonly seek help for include:

**Premenstrual Syndrome** is perhaps the most well-known complaint. PMS is used to describe several symptoms that collectively occur during the second half of the menstrual cycle, and subside with the onset of the period or very soon afterwards. The most common emotional or mood-related symptoms include irritability, anxiety, poor mood, and weepiness. Common physical symptoms include fluid retention, bloating, breast tenderness, acne, food cravings, brain fog and sleep disturbance

**Dysmenorrhea** is the term used to describe painful periods. A common description of period pain is a continual dull ache or sense of heaviness with episodes of cramping pain. The pain is usually central and located in the lower abdomen. Period pain is classified into two types:

- **Primary dysmenorrhea** - where there is period pain but the uterus itself is otherwise healthy and functioning normally; and

- **Secondary dysmenorrhea** - where the period pain is caused by an underlying condition, an example of which is endometriosis.

Some cases may affect fertility



**Endometriosis** is a condition in which endometrial tissue (the lining of the uterus) is found in sites outside the uterus, but typically within the abdomen. As mentioned earlier, oestrogen stimulates the growth of endometrial tissue. Every month, when oestrogen is being produced endometrial tissue is stimulated, wherever it is located. This can cause significant pain and inflammation, pelvic discomfort, painful sex, abnormal bleeding, PMS, and in some cases may affect fertility.

**Uterine Fibroids** are benign (non-cancerous) growths that may be asymptomatic, or may cause heavy periods, anaemia, frequent urination, constipation and pain. Fibroids, like endometriosis, have also been associated with infertility.

**Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS)** is a hormonal condition characterised by high levels of the hormone testosterone in a woman's body. Symptoms of PCOS include hirsutism (excessive growth of hair on a woman's face or body), obesity, infertility and insulin resistance (blood glucose imbalances).

# Factors that can impact healthy Hormonal Balance

## Stress

The stress hormone cortisol is derived from the same foundational structure as reproductive hormones such as estrogen, progesterone, testosterone, and DHEA. During periods of stress, hormone precursors are converted into cortisol instead of these reproductive hormones, resulting in an imbalance that can lead to irregular menstrual cycles and various other hormonal conditions.

## Inflammation

If your body is in an inflammatory state (e.g. being overweight), oestrogen-producing enzymes are 'switched-on,' leading to an increased production of oestrogen. This can lead to conditions associated with excess oestrogen activity, such as endometriosis. Inflammation is also a key factor in PCOS.

## Blood glucose irregularities:

Increased blood glucose levels, due to excess weight, metabolic syndrome or diabetes, promote inflammation leading to excess levels of oestrogen. Blood glucose imbalances may also contribute to excess testosterone production in PCOS.

## Hypothyroidism:

Poor thyroid function is associated with low levels of progesterone, therefore women with this condition may suffer higher levels of PMS symptoms and/or PCOS. Low thyroid function can also reduce the detoxification of both oestrogen and progesterone due to the impact the thyroid has on liver detoxification processes.

## Hormone detoxification:

To maintain balance, hormones such as oestrogen need to be excreted from your body via healthy detoxification, with this process occurring primarily in the gut and liver. However, if your detoxification capacity is impaired, for example due to compromised gut function (such as poor digestion, food intolerances), or liver function (e.g. excess alcohol consumption, medication use), then these hormones cannot be properly excreted, and may instead be reabsorbed into circulation. This can lead to conditions of hormonal activity excess, such as heavy periods, fibroids and endometriosis.

## Medications

Birth control medication, such as the OCP or hormonal intrauterine system (IUS), are synthetic hormones that work by 'switching-off' your body's own production of ovarian hormones. If you decide to stop using synthetic birth control you may experience symptoms such as absent or irregular cycles, or an exacerbation of menstrual symptoms you had previously as your body tries to re-establish its natural hormonal balance.

## Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs):

Are chemical substances found in plastics, pesticides, household cleaning products, food additives and contaminants, and many personal care products such as skin care items. EDCs have been linked with hormonal disruption and altered hormonal function in adult women and men, as well as in children.

# Healthy Eating for Healthy Hormones

## Omega-3 fatty acids

Omega-3 fatty acids, which cannot be synthesized by the body, are crucial for addressing hormonal imbalances caused by inflammation. Including foods like oily fish, avocado, nuts, seeds, and their oils, which are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, can provide anti-inflammatory effects and help restore hormonal balance.

## Antioxidants

The corpus luteum is responsible for progesterone production, healthy levels of which reduce PMS symptoms and promote a balanced mood. However, the corpus luteum is vulnerable to damage from oxidative processes, such as inflammation. Eating an antioxidant-rich diet helps protect your body against the effects of oxidative stressors, including the impact on the corpus luteum, helping promote healthy progesterone production. Antioxidants, such as vitamin E (found in almonds, egg yolk, hazel nuts, wheat germ), have been shown to increase progesterone production when it is deficient.

## Cruciferous vegetables

Help to promote the healthy elimination of oestrogen due to a plant chemical they contain known as sulphoraphane. Choose from broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, brussel sprouts, kale and maca root to get the benefits of these healthful veggies.

## Green leafy vegetables

Are a source of lutein, another antioxidant shown to support healthy progesterone function, which helps keep you calm during the second half of your cycle. Greens, such as spinach, kale, Swiss chard and collards, are also a good source of magnesium and B vitamins, which improve symptoms of PMS, dysmenorrhea, cramping, stress and poor sleep.

## Fibre

Foods rich in fibre promote healthy bowel function, helping to clear excess hormones from the body. Choose a wide range of vegetables and fruits, and eat them with the skin on where appropriate as this increases the fibre content. Other fibre-rich foods include beans, chickpeas, lentils, cashew nuts, pistachio nuts, chia seeds, oats and quinoa. Avoid refined 'white' grains which have had the natural fibre removed.



# Nutritional and herbal support for hormonal balance

## Chaste Tree

Also referred to as 'vitex' after its botanical name *Vitex agnus-castus*, this herb may provide symptomatic relief from PMS, menstrual pain and cramps, irregular periods, and may be beneficial in times of stress.

## Vitamin B6

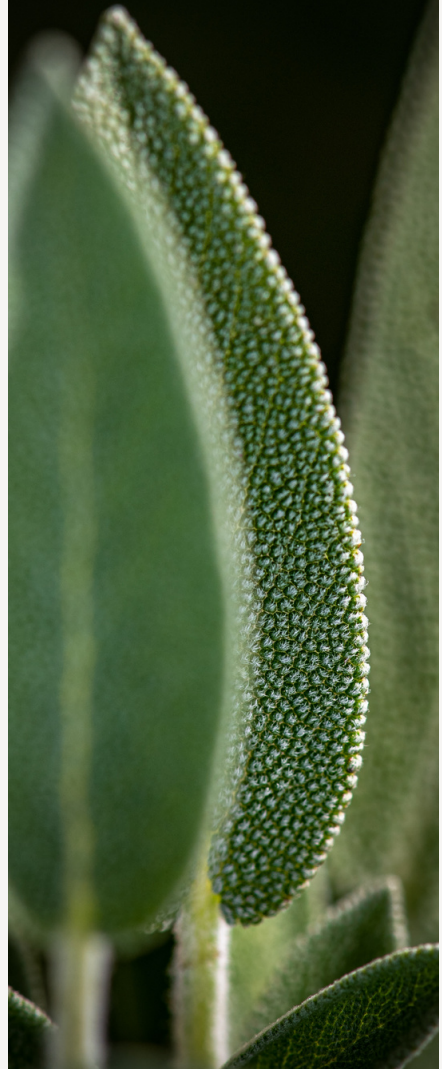
Is important for the production of brain chemicals, such as calming GABA, and can be low in women that suffer from PMS. Vitamin B6 also assists with the healthy metabolism and detoxification of oestrogen.

## Iodine

An important mineral that promotes healthy ovulation, reduces ovulatory pain and boosts progesterone activity. Iodine also promotes healthy detoxification of oestrogen and makes cells less sensitive to excess oestrogen activity. This is beneficial in oestrogen dependant conditions, such as fibroids and endometriosis.

## Magnesium

Is a highly absorbable form of magnesium. A deficiency of magnesium has been shown to increase symptoms of PMS, cramping, dysmenorrhoea, stress, and insomnia.



# Nutritional and herbal support for hormonal balance

## **Turmeric**

provides antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects. These actions are particularly beneficial when managing pain as well as any excess oestrogen activity, such as can occur in endometriosis.

## **Withania**

This herb that helps increase the body's resistance and ability to cope with stress, both emotional and physical, due to its effect on the nervous system

## **White Peony and Licorice**

These herbs are used together to support healthy testosterone balance in women, and assist in the management of menstrual irregularities, acne and excessive hair growth.



## CONCLUSION

# This is the beginning of something good.

Many women seek out natural solutions for the management of these and other hormonal imbalances, finding the approach of Complementary Medicine very effective. Holistic treatment of female reproductive issues focuses on restoring balance to hormonal and reproductive systems, not only by addressing symptoms, but also by correcting any underlying imbalance.

Treating female hormonal imbalances focuses on addressing any excess or deficiency in the activity of a hormone, rather than by increasing or decreasing the production of a hormone. This has particular relevance for women that present with clinical symptoms of hormone imbalance but do not necessarily have 'abnormal' hormone levels reflected in their blood tests or other pathology.

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