

Stress and Hormone Disharmony

By Angela Frieswyk, Medical Herbalist & Clinical Nutritionist



the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis into action. This results in the

STRESS, it is insidious, ever increasing and an often unmanaged consequence of modern life. Even in the space of one generation stress seems to have escalated significantly. It has become almost normal to cram an unrealistic number of tasks into one day. The economy driving us to be ever more competitive, forcing us to work harder to get a job, to keep a job, to maintain an image, to raise children, who in turn will be competitive.

Like many problems of modern life, stress is linked to numerous health complaints and is particularly disruptive to the delicate interplay of hormones. In my clinical practice I have seen an increase in the number of women suffering from symptoms of hormonal imbalances that are linked to their heightened stress levels; irregular menstruation, shortened cycles, heavy and clotted bleeding, PMS, cyclical thrush, menstrual pain, breast tenderness or amenorrhea (cessation of menstruation).

While stress does not just impact the hormonal system, I have confined this article to hormonal disruption, as these symptoms can often occur long before other chronic stress related disorders become apparent and should be considered good warning signs.

Stress and Hormonal Physiology (in a nutshell)

The physiology of stress on the hormonal system is like a complex telecommunications system. The body is first alarmed by any number of stress triggers, ringing

release of steroidal hormones from the adrenal gland, primarily cortisol, a major stress response hormone.

Each of these hormone releasing glands is linked via a two-way feedback network; changes in one hormone will alter hormone levels of the other glands along the feedback axis. The ovaries interact with the hypothalamic and pituitary (HPO axis). When stress is prolonged ovarian activity inevitably effected causing various menstrual cycle disruptions, including the potential to completely inhibit ovulation.

This is not to say that all menstrual problems are stress related. There are many other factors that may be involved and careful diagnosis is important, which may include making use of medical diagnostics in conjunction with your natural health practitioner. For example, care should be taken to identify cervical problems that may present as erratic spotting, PCOS that may present as irregular cycles or endometriosis that may present as excessive menstrual pain. Once it is clear (or clear enough) what is driving the symptoms, a holistic approach is often the best intervention for many problems, particularly stress related.

A Pragmatic Approach to Stress

Unfortunately modern medicine largely disregards the way the body is dealing with its environment. I am always saddened to see women prescribed 'the pill' for stress and lifestyle linked hormonal imbalances, stopping the buck short of the problem. Likewise, antidepressants,

anti-anxiety medications and sedatives only band-aid the stress response and do nothing to tonify the nervous system (an advantage of herbal nervines, adrenal tonics and adaptogens).

A holistic treatment requires a much more pragmatic approach and cannot come as a magic bullet, including the sole use of herbal medicine. Exercise for stress management is particularly beneficial, especially the long and slow type ... long walks, yoga, Tai chi ... while vigorous exercise is best saved for early morning. Nutrition and diet adjustment is essential, particularly as stress often drives people to carbohydrate and sugar dense foods, caffeine, alcohol and other stimulants at the expense of nutrient dense wholefoods. Social contact and working with people to find ways of managing commitments is necessary. Massage, body work, meditation or quiet reflection is always beneficial. Ideally these are prevention measures, though never too late to be attended to.

Herbal Allies for Glandular Health

Herbal medicine is particularly beneficial for supporting the nervous and endocrine (hormone) systems. A skilled Medical Herbalist or Naturopath should be employed here to bring together an individualised herbal, nutritional and lifestyle action plan. While single medicinal herbs can be used, it is more typical for a practitioner to blend several different herbs to obtain the necessary range of medicinal actions. The following are examples of some astounding herbs that work well for various levels of stress and hormonal disruption. I write this to promote knowledge of herbal medicine, but emphasize that herbal medicine can vary significantly in strength and quality and finding a reputed practitioner is your best way of 'getting it right'.

Herbal nervines: Herbal nervines support the body by helping control the stimulation of the nervous system on the adrenals. Passionflower (*Passiflora incarnata*) is particularly good for anxiety, in fact a recent study found that Passionflower was equally effective for mild/moderate anxiety compared to benzodiazepines, and without the addiction and the side-effects (1). St Johns Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) is indicated when mood and sleep is effected, as it helps restore 'feel good' serotonin levels and sleep enhancing melatonin production. Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*), often thought of as a sleep herb, can also be used in small doses throughout the day to calm an over-reactive nervous system. Nervines include many other effective herbs, each with subtle differences on when they are best used.

Adrenal tonics: *Rehmannia glutinosa* is a reputed adrenal tonic, shown to maintain cortisol at normal levels and prevent or reverse damage to pituitary and adrenal cortex (2,3). Liquorice root (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) is also a noted adrenal tonic, but should be avoided with high or unstable blood pressure. Adrenal tonics are particularly important for people who are under unrelenting stress to help prevent and treat adrenal fatigue.

Adaptogenic herbs: Adaptogens are a group of herbs that help the body to adapt to the changes induced by stress. The mechanism of each herb differs, though the symptomatic result for all is improved stamina for coping with stress. My favoured adaptogenic herbs for female physiology are Siberian ginseng (*Eleuthrococcus senticosus*) and Withania (*Withania somnifera*). Withania, in particular, is a wonderful restorative herb which also has immune enhancing and blood building properties.

Chaste tree (*Vitex agnus castus*): This herb can correct a number of menstrual disorders, particularly irregular cycle, PMT and breast tenderness. Chaste tree is able to lower prolactin levels (implied in breast tenderness and lack of ovulation) and alter the activity of the hypothalamus-pituitary-ovarian axis. It is a very beneficial herb for many menstrual problems, but must be dosed appropriately and used for sufficient time for full benefits.

Nutritional Support: Stress, particularly prolonged stress, places extra nutritional demands on the body while also slow-

ing the digestive processes. B complex, vitamin C, zinc and magnesium are particularly important for supporting the nervous system and adrenal glands. For those who have impaired digestion and hence nutrient absorption, herbs such Dandelion root (*Taraxacum officinale*) and Gentian (*Gentiana lutea*) are helpful. Digestive problems are easily detected by signs of bloating, weak nails, lack luster hair and skin, lack of vitality, etc, along with clues indicated by Ayurvedic tongue diagnosis and, with a skilled reader, iridology.

Prolonged stress may also effect insulin release from the pancreas, resulting in sugar cravings and blood sugar imbalances. *Gymnema sylvestre* in combination with chromium and other nutrients is particularly helpful for this.

Essential fatty acids (omega 3, 6 and 9) are most helpful for all manner of hormonal problems, particularly those involving menstrual pain, skin complaints, bleeding/clotting problems and any inflammatory linked condition.

Essential fatty acids are often deficient in people with diets low in oily fish (such as sardines, salmon, mackerel, herring) and fresh raw nuts and seeds.

The body has a great capacity to restore hormonal equilibrium. But the modern mind also has a great capacity to trudge along ignoring the warning signs of ill health. It is time for women to regain their intimate sense of self balance and address stress and hormonal imbalances before more entrenched conditions such

as thyroid problems and adrenal fatigue ensue. I have seen many cases of menstrual disorders improve with lifestyle intervention, diet change and with nature's oldest clinic trial, herbal medicine.

About the Author



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