

*Understanding  
Hormones & Using  
the Four Week  
Meal Plan*



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## Understanding Hormones: What You Need to Know

When the word “hormones” is used, most think of estrogen, progesterone and testosterone. The truth is that we have many hormones that regulate the functions in our bodies and interact with each other, making them more complicated than the average person would assume.

Healthy hormones are not just reproductive hormones, but also adrenal, thyroid, liver, digestive and intestinal. They all have to function properly.



This program will help you unravel the complexity of it all with a food plan that helps support each type of hormone. The benefit is that it does not matter if you are seeing a naturopath, a medical doctor or a nutrition professional; it works in conjunction with any protocol you may be following.

Menopause is a normal process but the symptoms most associated with it are not. There isn't a good, natural reason that any woman

should experience unpleasant symptoms during this transitional period.

Understanding how the body works and what is happening during this phase in your life can help you navigate your way through the symptoms, and possibly even avoid them altogether.

Menopause is a time of transition. For many women, it can be an examination of the life they are leaving behind and a time of freedom as family responsibilities start to decrease. Ideally, it can also be a time for a woman to focus on herself and what she wants to do and achieve in the years to come.

Many women have mixed emotions when it comes to this stage of their life. They may feel a sense of loss or question whether they are still attractive. Many feel this change challenges their sense of femaleness. Nothing can be further from the truth. Fertility does not define a woman. It is merely a natural stage. When it ends, a new chapter begins.

Take this time to really think about you and who you are as a person. Challenge the notion that your femininity is tied to your fertility. It is not. You are the beautiful, smart, vital person you have always been. Yes, your body has gone through some changes, life does that, but that does not change your value to the world.

If anything, this may be the time that you accomplish the most because of the new freedoms you have. You have experience and a depth of knowledge that is superior to what you had when you were younger, and this can translate into amazing things. Many women choose to take on new challenges while others choose to focus on working on themselves. It doesn't matter what you decide to do, as long as you treat this as a time of joy and adventure, embracing it as the wonderful time of life that it is!

The only hiccup is the potential for unpleasant symptoms during this phase. It is hard to feel positive and amazing when hot flashes, mood swings and fatigue are experienced on a daily basis. So, the key is to balance your hormones to support the systems that need to function well.

Let's start by discussing what it means to have balanced hormones:

- ✓ Your period may be fluctuating or it has ceased, but you feel normal.
- ✓ You have energy and feel calm and motivated.
- ✓ Your sex drive and libido are what you want them to be.
- ✓ You are not depressed, and look forward to the freedom this time of your life will provide.
- ✓ You feel a sense of excitement for new adventures.
- ✓ Most importantly, you feel like yourself physically, mentally and emotionally

## The Three Stages of Menopause:

**Perimenopause:** This is the time when women begin to notice changes in their cycle and period. It can start years before they actually go through the menopause phase. If they are estrogen dominant and/or experience high levels of stress, symptoms of menopause can start during this time. Stress can make symptoms worse.

**Menopause:** The start of menopause is marked by a drop in progesterone, followed by a drop in estrogen. Once the period has permanently stopped, menopause is over. If a woman is estrogen dominant, this initial stage is more pronounced and symptoms can be more severe. The stress factor also makes symptoms worse.

**Postmenopausal:** Once the period has stopped and the ovaries are no longer producing estrogen and progesterone, the adrenal glands must pick up the slack, producing a small amount of progesterone, estrogen, and testosterone to cover a woman's needs for the rest of her life. Stress can mess with this process, which is the biggest reason why women experience symptoms during this time.

## What happens when a woman has had a hysterectomy or oophorectomy?

A hysterectomy is a surgical procedure that involves the removal of the uterus. In an oophorectomy, the ovaries are removed. Both scenarios cause the period to stop. This may seem like an easy way to avoid the symptoms of menopause but unfortunately, that is not how it plays out for women. Most of these procedures are performed because of benign issues that are causing the woman discomfort. However, the issues that lead a woman toward having a hysterectomy are related to the hormones, usually estrogen dominance, which can be corrected to avoid the surgery.

Despite having the surgery, many women still have excess estrogen in their system because it can be stored in fat cells. Also, the adrenal glands are not necessarily ready to fulfill their duty of protecting woman with small levels of hormones, as they would have if she had gone through a normal menopause cycle. Stress, as always, can make this worse and many women experience the symptoms of menopause. Some of the long-term consequences of having a hysterectomy include pelvic organ prolapse, urinary incontinence, bowel dysfunction and issues with sexual function.

## Signs and Symptoms of Abnormal Menopause

It all starts with the perimenopause stage. The period starts to become irregular and the symptoms of "menopause" may begin. As long as there is a period, ovulation may still be occurring. Once there has been a cessation of periods for 12 months, the perimenopause stage is over and the menopause stage has begun. Symptoms can still occur during the menopause stage.

**Irregular Periods:** They can be longer or shorter than what was experienced through adult life, and they may not show signs of consistency; one month may be longer than normal and the next may be shorter. Many women have experienced period irregularities and may not notice the change. Or, periods can become more of an issue with excessive bleeding, especially if fibroids are present. Every woman will have a different experience depending on many factors. Eventually, the periods start to become more infrequent and often monthly symptoms like PMS are less severe. Unfortunately, new symptoms may appear.

**Hot Flashes:** A hot flash is an increased sensation of warmth or heat and can include sweating. It often comes on suddenly and can include symptoms such as warm skin, tingling in the fingers, faster heartbeat, flushed or red face, and of course, sweating – sometimes profuse. Hot flashes are an adrenal issue and stress and anxiety are a frequent trigger. Alcohol, smoking, caffeine, and spicy foods can also trigger a hot flash. They can last from 30 seconds to 10 minutes. Applying an ice pack or drinking ice water may provide some relief but the key is to prevent them altogether. Balancing hormones with a focus on managing stress and supporting the adrenal glands is the key.

**Sleep Issues:** During both perimenopause and menopause, many women have trouble getting a good night's sleep. They either have trouble falling asleep, cannot stay asleep, or both. They may also experience hot flashes in the middle of the night. Once again, the adrenals are involved as they control the production of our "awake" hormone cortisol. Cortisol is supposed to decrease steadily in the evening so that we can easily fall asleep. If there is too much cortisol, we do not sleep. Some women find themselves waking up at 3:00 or 4:00 AM and then are unable to fall back to sleep. This is also an adrenal problem. We secrete ACTH, a hormone produced in the pituitary to prepare the adrenals to release cortisol in the morning when we wake up. However, when the adrenals are not functioning properly, the cortisol can start pumping immediately, which means sleep is not going to happen for the rest of the night. Developing a relaxation strategy, going to bed at the same time every night and supporting adrenal function can help.

**Vaginal Dryness:** A decrease in estrogen can also cause a decrease in lubrication and blood flow, which can make sexual intercourse difficult. The adrenals are now responsible for producing a sufficient amount of estrogen in order to prevent this.

**Mood Swings:** Many women find that during this time, they become angry more easily and often feel irritated. Depression is another symptom. Reduced hormone levels can affect the brain, especially the areas that control emotions. The nervous system can also be more agitated, especially if stress levels are high and blood sugar fluctuates up and down. Adrenal support, reducing stress and stabilizing blood sugar by eating whole foods and eating regularly all help.

**Joint and Muscles Pains:** Hormones help maintain joint health and muscle function. So, it is quite common for women to feel more aches and pains. Balancing hormones and regular exercise, especially stretching and range of motion exercises, can be beneficial.

**Memory Problems:** This may be the most difficult symptom. There is a link between estrogen receptors in the brain and memory issues. Many women feel like their brain is foggy and their focus and concentration is not what it once was. Sleep issues can play a role with memory issues. Focus on adrenal support, relaxation techniques and low intensity aerobic exercises.

## Health Problems Related to Menopause

**Osteoporosis:** Estrogen is a key player in maintaining bone health. Too little estrogen leads to bone loss and it is the adrenal glands that are responsible for producing the correct amount of estrogen needed for bone health. Progesterone helps with bone building as well and again, the adrenals and stress affect the levels of progesterone needed for proper bone health.

**Heart Health:** Women in menopause are at greater risk for heart-related issues. It is believed that estrogen helps keep artery walls flexible and prevents the hardening of the arteries. If the adrenals are functioning properly, you will have the amount of estrogen needed for a healthy heart. This is dependent on stress levels.

## What About Testosterone?

During menopause, a woman's normal level of testosterone may also decline. There is a relationship between testosterone and estrogen and it is believed that it is needed to support estrogen levels and can contribute to maintaining bone health. Testosterone is also needed for libido and maintaining muscle mass. The adrenals are responsible for helping maintain healthy testosterone levels during this time.

## Understanding the Systems in the Body That Play a Role During Menopause

There are several systems in the body that produce hormones and they must function well in order for your body to work properly:

**The Adrenals:** You may think your brain is in charge but the truth is that the adrenals rule the roost. They decide if you are going to function as designed or if any of your normal functions need to be rearranged so you can deal with stress. As far as the adrenals are concerned, stress for any reason is a danger and you must be protected. Think of them as having a powerful brain of their own. They can increase your appetite or shut it down. They can signal to the liver to drive up your blood sugar. They can stimulate your metabolism and thyroid function or slow it down. They can convert testosterone to estrogen and blunt progesterone production to allow for the production of more cortisol, the number one hormone the adrenals like to use to help you feel energized enough to deal with stress (at least for a while, since they are not designed to do this all the time).

A surplus of cortisol is linked to many symptoms including fatigue, blood sugar problems, weight gain, depression, mood swings, anxiety, and menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes and low sex drive. It is also linked to the development of degenerative illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Excess cortisol can suppress thyroid function, put extra pressure on the liver, hinder sex hormones and inhibit digestive and intestinal function.

There are many stress-reducing strategies that you can employ, but what you eat and when can make a big difference, allowing the body and the adrenals to have all of the nutrients they need to function appropriately.

**Key Adrenal Foods:** Schizandra and maca are both adrenal adaptogens, which means that they balance the adrenal function. This will be very helpful for menopause. They are usually taken as supplements but they are foods so they can be added to your diet very easily as you will see in this program.

Schizandra is a berry that is often available in the form of dried berries or powder. It helps with adrenal and liver function, helps stabilize blood sugar and energy levels and supports the nervous system which can help with sleep issues, hot flashes and moods.

Maca is a root vegetable that can be found as a powder. It also helps menopausal issues, such as sex drive, vaginal dryness and energy. You will find recipes with maca to make it easier for you to incorporate it into your diet.

Licorice root (avoid if taking high blood pressure medicine) and ginseng teas are also great for the adrenals and helpful for hormones.

**The Liver:** No organ is as hardworking as the liver. With over 400 functions to accomplish, it is very busy and requires plenty of nutrients. The liver produces cholesterol which is a building block for estrogen, testosterone, progesterone and cortisol, so it is critical to hormone health. It also aids the thyroid and helps regulate metabolism. Cholesterol is needed to produce bile which is essential for digesting fats and helps remove toxins from the body. The liver is the main detoxification organ. Not only does it remove toxins, both the kind we ingest and the kind that our bodies make, but it detoxes out excess hormones as well. This is helpful for women who have been estrogen dominant prior to menopause. There are many foods that support liver health and the detoxification process.

**Key Liver Foods:** Cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli, Calcium d-glucarate foods such as apples and grapefruit, bitter foods like dandelion or collard greens,



and sulfur-rich foods such as garlic and onions. High antioxidant foods like berries, carrots, tomatoes, asparagus and other fruits and vegetables. Jerusalem artichokes are extremely good for the liver. Milk thistle tea is also very beneficial.

**The Digestive System:** The digestive system is where everything starts, good and bad. If you eat foods that your body needs and you digest and absorb them properly, you will benefit from the nutrients. If you do not have proper digestion and absorption, the foods will not be as effective. This can be improved by practicing proper eating habits, reducing

stress, improving good bacteria levels and eating enzyme-rich foods.

**Key Digestive System Foods:** Fermented foods, herbs and spices, and raw foods (if tolerable) for enzymes can all be helpful.

**The Thyroid:** The role of the thyroid is to control your metabolism. It helps regulate breathing, heart rate, the central and peripheral nervous systems, body weight, muscle strength, menstrual cycles, body temperature and cholesterol levels. Since cholesterol is correlated with healthy hormones, a healthy thyroid is necessary.

**Thyroid Foods:** Sea vegetables like nori or arame, seafood, Himalayan sea salt, and coconut oil.

**The Intestinal System and the Microflora:** The good bacteria in your gut helps regulate everything, supporting liver function, thyroid function, adrenal function, digestive and intestinal function as well as reproductive function. A hormone balancing food plan must include probiotic and prebiotic foods that help stabilize the gut bacteria. We are all unique, so the quality and quantity of our good bacteria varies. This means that gut bacteria can play a small role or be a huge factor in any health issue. Gut health is complicated and may require extra guidance from a nutrition professional. However, supplying the gut with the right foods will work well with any protocol.

**Key Intestinal System Foods:** Fermented foods, prebiotic foods, fibre-rich foods and water (preferably non-chlorinated – do not drink reverse osmosis or distilled) are all good for the intestines.



All of these systems directly affect the health of your hormones as well as each other. Because of that, it is improper practice to work on only one of them. You have to work on all of them. You can do this by working on your stress levels, managing your lifestyle, and taking any necessary supplements to compensate for what you are not getting through your food.

The goal of this program is to support these systems. This is best accomplished by:

- Eating specific foods that will support their functions.
- Improving lifestyle habits, including stress management and exercise.
- Determining which supplements you need with your health practitioner.

## How to Use the Program:

There are four weeks of menu plans with foods that will support the adrenals, liver, thyroid, and the digestive and intestinal systems. The recipes have all of the key nutrients that the body needs to function properly.

Supplements can be added if needed.

If you are still having periods, then week one supports the follicular phase which is the first phase after your period ends. Week two supports the ovulation phase. Week three supports the luteal phase and week four supports the menstrual phase. Once periods have ceased, it does not matter which week you follow as all weeks have foods to support hormone health, no matter where you are in your menopausal cycle.



A food list is provided to cover all areas of the body that need support and supply key nutrients. Some of the foods are found in more than one category, which makes it easier for you to incorporate multi-beneficial items. For example, broccoli is a liver food that specializes in detoxing excess estrogen. It is also a prebiotic food that feeds our good bacteria as well as a phytoestrogen food which helps balance estrogen in the body. Many of broccoli's fellow cruciferous vegetables do the same thing, so if you do not like that particular vegetable, you can use the list of foods to find a suitable substitute.

You do not have to follow the food plan exactly as it is, but you do need to consume the types of foods that are recommended. Look at the key foods list in each phase to understand what you need to be eating and when. The plan makes it easy to decide on a menu, but you will need to do the food preparation. So, if time is an issue, look for prepared options that match what is recommended. For example, if you do not have time to marinate and grill salmon, buy a wild caught prepared salmon, add the recommended vegetables and seasonings and you will have a similar meal that will be equally beneficial.

If you follow the full 28-day plan as it is written, you will have learned a number of wonderful recipes for healthy hormones, and will also have a great sense of what your body wants and needs. Your eating habits will have changed and your body may have started to respond. It will teach you enough to adapt recipes of your own and make better decisions about foods. The plan has been designed to give you a variety of options and ideas for the future.

## Other Things to Do During the Program:

- Get enough sleep. 7-8 hours is ideal. Go to bed and get up at the same time each night and morning to develop a habit. This will be helpful for sleep issues you may be having.
- Have a relaxing herbal tea before bed such as chamomile, valerian, hops, passion flower or a combination.
- Drink plenty of water. It helps flush out toxins and keeps the body hydrated. Just do not drink with meals as this will dilute stomach acid and interfere with digestion. Spring water or carbon-filtered water is best. Water needs to have minerals, so avoid reverse osmosis or distilled.
- Practice deep breathing. It helps lower cortisol and relaxes the nervous system. As a technique, it can be used throughout the day to combat feelings of stress and anxiety. As you can see, stress, cortisol and the adrenal glands play a key role in menopausal symptoms so this will help.
- Learn to do traditional meditation or mindful meditation – both work to lower cortisol and activate repair mechanisms in the body. This will be helpful for hormone health.
- Exercise. Even if you simply go on a short walk every day. Movement – any movement – is the goal. If playing golf or going dancing is fun for you, then that is what you should do to stay active. Exercise can help lower cortisol, improve moods and help with sleep issues as long as you do not exercise just before bedtime. Fresh air makes exercise even more beneficial.

## Practice the Steps to Good Digestion:

1. Chew your food. This is the number one reason for reflux and digestive upset. Chewing allows for more saliva to be mixed into your food. Saliva contains enzymes for digesting carbohydrates, beneficial bacteria and appetite-regulating hormones leptin and ghrelin. Chewing your food sends signals to the body to prepare it for the types of nutrients it is about to receive. 30-40 times will work wonders. One study found that chewing 40 times (as opposed to 15) helped participants lose weight.
2. Take time to savour your food. Food is meant to be a pleasure and by enjoying our foods, we will benefit more from them while lowering our stress levels as we relax and eat. Take at least 20 minutes to eat. Longer if you can. Relax. Breathe. Enjoy.
3. Eat smaller meals more often – this technique can be helpful for individuals who are trying to lose weight. It is also helpful for blood sugar. You have to decide what works best for you. Some people prefer three good solid meals and others prefer five or six smaller meals. What you should never do is eat until you are full. This stresses the digestive system. Plan to eat until you are about 80 percent full. This satisfies appetite, nutrient needs and does not put as much pressure on the digestive system.



4. Try food sequencing. Eat vegetables first and the carbohydrates and protein last. Fruit is consumed alone or can be eaten with the vegetables. This allows the vegetables and carbohydrates to move more quickly through the stomach to get to the small intestines where they will be digested. Meat and fish protein need to spend more time in the stomach. By eating these last, they can spend the time they need in the stomach alone which will aid digestion.
5. Consume salads or fermented foods with meals to aid digestion. These contain enzyme and acids that can be helpful.
6. Do not drink with meals. Too much liquid dilutes stomach acid and fills the stomach cavity with more volume, which can lead to reflux. It is similar to eating too much. If a stomach is too full, it does not matter whether it is from liquid or solid food. You can sip some liquid, such as small amounts of wine,

as it is a fermented beverage with enzymes and was designed to be sipped with meals. Water can be sipped as well, in small volume.

7. Try digestive enzymes and/or probiotic supplements. Speak to your health practitioner about options. These can help improve digestion and absorption.
8. Determine whether you have a food sensitivity. These are not necessarily permanent and require a lot of gut health work to fix, but in the short-term, reducing a food sensitivity can temporarily improve digestion and intestinal issues. The key is to not make assumptions. Do not listen to common beliefs about specific foods. We are all different and there is nothing worse than pulling out a food because it is a fad to do so, ultimately complicating your life and causing you more stress (which is bad for digestion). Instead, keep a food journal. Write down what you eat, the time you eat it and how you feel both physically and emotionally throughout the day. This can help pinpoint how and when you should eat and if any particular food may be bothering you. Do it for 2 weeks. Paying attention to how you feel on busy work days as compared to relaxing days off can be enlightening. It can show what stress is doing to you. Consult a nutrition professional for assistance.



Please note: Most of the recipes in this program are designed to serve one person. If you need to prepare a meal for more than one person, simply multiply each measurement by the number of people you want to feed.

**The most important goal is to enjoy the food and the process and feed your hormones the foods they love!**

