

Balancing act: The dance of plants and hormones

The stress of modern life can throw your hormones out of whack. These plant-based foods can help.

BY MARY SAVAGE

Hormones play a significant role in overall health—from metabolism and weight management to sex drive and mood. They are chemical messengers, secreted by various glands found in the endocrine system, which travel throughout the body to keep all the major systems working in harmony.

A change in energy levels, particularly fatigue, is often an early indicator your hormones may be imbalanced. Thyroid problems such as brain fog, headaches, hot flashes and thinning or dry hair may also indicate hormonal changes.

You want healthy hormones—this is one of the keys to aging gracefully. Managing stress is key to healthy hormones. So are the foods you eat.

Dieticians recommend nutrient-dense, plant-based whole foods such as fermented foods, leafy greens and omega 3's. Yes, these are excellent choices, but let's look beyond the obvious and dig into foods that multi-task both hormonally and nutritionally.

CHERRIES

If there were a near-perfect bedtime snack, these dark beauties are it. Cherries offer a natural source of melatonin, magnesium and vitamin C, all of which can enhance a good night's sleep.



As we age, our bodies create less melatonin, also known as the sleep hormone, which is produced by the pineal gland. Recent studies indicate that cherries promote an increased level of melatonin, for better sleep quality and total sleep time.

They also contain magnesium, which encourages a deeper sleep by supporting optimal levels of GABA, a neurotransmitter. Cherries contain vitamin C, an essential vitamin for regulating estrogen and progesterone, as well as ellagic acid, known for its cancer-preventing properties, plus a host of minerals and phytochemicals.

Try a handful of cherries every evening before bed.

ASHWAGANDHA

[INDIAN GINSENG OR WINTER CHERRIES]

This root hails from India where it is prized for its health benefits. It is considered an "adaptogen," meaning your body uses only what it needs and eliminates the rest. It is most effective when used daily over a period of several weeks.

Ashwagandha rejuvenates and energizes the nervous system and helps to reduce two stress-related conditions: vitamin C depletion and the elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol secreted by the adrenal glands. It has anti-inflammatory and anti-aging properties; and increases physical endurance and improves sexual function. And in certain studies, it has been shown to modulate the immune system.

Although the texture and taste tends to be chalky and bitter, the health benefits far outweigh any after taste. Sprinkle a heaping teaspoon into a morning smoothie to bury its unique taste.

FLAXSEEDS

The phrase “small but mighty” best describes the relationship between your hormones and this wonder-seed. Flaxseeds contain a type of phytoestrogen called lignans, which help to regulate estrogen receptors. Think of it as a “lock and key” system. Your estrogen receptors are the locks and the lignans are the keys that help to modulate your hormones.



When you consume ground flaxseed, the lignans “occupy” the receptors. However, when the receptors are unoccupied, they are easily fooled by xenoestrogens—chemicals frequently found in plastics that mimic our hormones.

When you take a swig of water from a plastic water bottle, the xenoestrogens try to occupy the receptors and subsequently cause estrogen levels to climb. In short, xenoestrogens wreak havoc with your hormones by sending them sky-high.

When flaxseeds are consumed every day, your hormone receptors are occupied by the lignans, thereby blocking and deflecting the xenoestrogens. They are also an excellent source of Omega 3 and dietary fiber.

Grind flaxseeds in small batches and store in the fridge. Consume one to two heaping tablespoons daily.

POMEGRANATE

Known for its juicy, bright-red seeds, this fruit tops the list when it comes to nutrition and balancing hormones. Consumed for its many health benefits by ancient cultures, not only is it rich in antioxidants, flavonoids, minerals, tannins and phenolics, but it can actually help block excess estrogen.



As noted in a January, 2017 Update, US National Library of Medicine, pomegranates show promise of preventing certain types of cancer, including breast cancer, which responds to estrogen. This fruit contains several natural compounds that may inhibit a powerful estrogen that plays a role in the origin in hormone-dependent cancers.

More than 50% of the nutrients come from the white skin (membrane) that surrounds the seeds. The “pericarp” is a must-have the next time you twist open a pomegranate jewel. Try sprinkling these on a salad!

MACA ROOT

Another adaptogen, this root is superb at helping at the body combat the negative effects of prolonged stress. Your adrenal glands work overtime during stressful periods—releasing excess cortisol and adrenaline until eventually they burn out, which can lead to an array of problems: high blood pressure, elevated glucose levels, depression, diabetes, anxiety and autoimmune conditions.



Used over a period of time, Maca supports and nourishes your hypothalamus and pituitary gland, which in turn helps to rebalance your overworked adrenal glands. It is also effective at balancing hormones during menopause, and it supports sex drive, thyroid function and bone density.

Maca root powder is another must-add to your morning smoothie.

Experiment with these foods and find a way to consume them every day. Your entire endocrine system will thank you. In turn, don't be surprised if you find yourself with more energy, clearer thinking, better sleep—and an enhanced sex drive! [my](#)

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