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The Essential Trade Journal for Today's Therapist

How Hormones Can Weigh You Down

I have lost count of the number of women that I hear from who are convinced that their weight gain is a thyroid problem. They have had the blood tests that come back normal and their GP's only advice is to cut their meagre calorie intake even further. This is a tragic state of affairs that often ends up with CAM practitioners advising on better nutrition and battling with "unseen forces" with, inexplicably, only a marginal impact.



So how can hormones affect our weight and shape so dramatically?

Reason No 1

Sadly, most women in their 20s, 30s and 40s are oestrogen-dominant (especially if you are on the Pill), and a frequent complaint from women about weight gain is about their change in shape. Fat accumulates around the lower stomach, buttocks/hips and thighs.

Too much oestrogen - which is very common - also causes the tissues around the abdominal area to retain water. As you get older - from mid 30s - you start to have more frequent non-egg producing cycles (anovulatory) and, as a result, this bloating can become a permanent feature because of increasing hormone imbalance. This excess of oestrogen can also affect men, too! Has your man gained weight woman-style? Does he have "man-boobs" and weight gain around the hips? Double mastectomies are on the increase for men as medicine's answer to this hormone imbalance. Wouldn't it be better to try natural hormone balancing before resorting to this tragic and humiliating surgery?

Reason No 2

If your weight gain is more generalised this may

be due to a functional thyroid deficiency, which is caused by our "friend", oestrogen-dominance. Too much oestrogen will cause an increase in Thyroid Binding Globulin (TBG), which will provide you with thyroid-type symptoms such as weight gain, cold body temperature, depression, fatigue and constipation, to mention a few. Address the oestrogen-dominance and the thyroid symptoms will disappear. (This type of thyroid problem will not show up on a doctor's blood test for under-active thyroid.)

Reason No 3

An excess of oestrogen will also cause insulin to be released more rapidly and more often, which means that you will crave sugary foods! Insulin has important biological effects, aside from transporting blood glucose into your cells. It can also reprogramme your cells to act like older cells, so, in other words, it can fast-forward your biological clock!

So there are a number of very good reasons to be mindful of insulin. Now, to further illustrate how interconnected your hormones are and how they relate to the potential for weight gain, I want to share with you the link between stress and insulin.

Stress increases adrenal hormones, and adrenal hormones increase insulin resistance. Insulin resistance means that your cells need more insulin to be able to transport the glucose from the blood. This sets up the potential for diabetes.

Reason No 4

Cortisol is the stress hormone produced by the adrenal glands, and if you have been under stress for some time you may be experiencing that tired-all-the-time feeling combined with a need to eat to keep energy levels up. This is because your cortisol levels are dropping due to adrenal fatigue. Unfortunately, you may also be choosing high-fat and high-sugar foods to provide quick energy and coffee to provide you with the lift. This eating-for-energy approach will cause spikes in cortisol levels on a frequent basis and causes people who are already low in cortisol to put weight on, especially around the middle or tummy area. This can cause even more fatigue

and deepen the cycle. With oestrogen being the main villain of the piece, it may be hard to work out where it's coming from.

Here are some key things worth considering:

- ☺ Is your client on the Pill or HRT? Does she suffer from common oestrogen-dominance problems such as tender breasts, bloating, water retention and PMS?
- ☺ Does your client eat mainly processed microwave meals? These will not only increase the foreign, or xeno, oestrogen levels, they will also increase salt (further supports water retention) and sugar intake (giving sugar hits that may provide a short-term energy boost but will also provoke insulin spikes).
- ☺ Does your client drink alcohol daily? One drink can triple oestrogen levels, providing short-term hormonal spikes that confuse the body's biorhythms. Alcohol also affects the way that oestrogen is secreted and broken down in the body.
- ☺ Does your client carry a lot of body fat? This may seem like an odd question in a weight-management discussion, but weight versus size can be a tricky subject that doesn't just boil down to what the scales say! If your lady (or man) is carrying a solid amount of body fat, she/he is undoubtedly carrying the ability to manufacture oestrogen through conversion of body fat by the aromatase enzyme. (It is to counter this that post-menopausal breast cancer patients are given the aromatase inhibitor Arimidex, to block this process.)

A word about Xenoestrogens ...

The main worry about xenoestrogens, or even synthetic oestrogens, is that unlike their natural hormone cousins (for example, natural progesterone and phytoestrogens), they are not swiftly broken down by the body after they have performed their function. Hormones are only needed and used by the body in very tiny and very transient amounts. Their life is, and should be, very fleeting, disappearing without a trace. Natural progesterone, for example, will circulate through the body into the liver where it is inactivated, excreted through the bile and then back into the bloodstream and out in the urine.

So as the Christmas and New Year festivities loom over the horizon, don't think too long and hard about what you may be doing and how it may be affecting your hormones. But when January 1st comes around and the promises of a new regimen for the new year seem to be harder to stick to than was first thought and the scales have reached new depths, spare a thought for your hormones and the route march you've just sent them on! **TT**

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