



3 Strategies to Keep Your Sex Hormones Balanced

By Janice Stanger, PhD
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(This is the second article in a series that includes [Why Hormones Matter and Three Ways to Mess Them Up.](#))

Modern lifestyles contribute to unbalanced, excessive, or deficient levels of sex hormones in men and women. This may result in unpleasant outcomes—such as low sex drive or infertility—as well as to dangerous diseases, including cancer and heart disease. Here's key information you need to make choices to help keep your sex hormones balanced.

While there are multiple male and female sex hormones, I'm going to concentrate on the best-known: estrogen and testosterone. You might not be aware that women produce and use testosterone, and men produce and use estrogen. The bodies of both sexes can convert testosterone into estrogen. So all sex hormones are important to you, whether you are male or female.

Balancing Strategy One: Carefully Consider Before Taking Supplementary Hormones

Some people have diagnosed medical conditions that may be treated with supplementary estrogen, testosterone, or other sex hormones. Before deciding whether to use hormones if you have one of these conditions, be sure you thoroughly understand the potential benefits and risks—and weigh these carefully—since sex hormones influence your entire body. Consider if there are alternative evidence-based treatments, as well as the benefits and risks of these. If you use oral contraceptives, be sure to understand possible side effects.

Millions of men and women seek supplementary hormones for vague purposes, such as weight loss, low energy, or a quest to regain lost youthfulness. In this case, the risks are likely to outweigh potential benefits. This is true regardless of whether you use compounded bioidentical hormones or those approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

The National Toxicology Program of the Department of Health & Human Services classifies estrogen as a known human carcinogen, associated with both uterine and breast cancer. Supplementary or excessive estrogen has also been linked to ovarian cancer, prostate cancer, dementia, and stroke.

The dangers of testosterone supplements are not as well understood, with studies finding different outcomes. The FDA requires labeling of prescription testosterone products for safety risks affecting the heart and mental health, as well as the potential for abuse. If you take these supplements, benefits, if any, may be small and fleeting. A medical journal editorial titled “Testosterone and Male Aging: Faltering Hope for Rejuvenation” states that “the sole unequivocal indication for testosterone treatment is as replacement therapy for men with ... organic disorders of the reproductive system.”

Balancing Strategy Two: Avoid Endocrine Disruptors in the Environment

Endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs) are capable of altering the production and/or function of many hormones. Interference with estrogen is the most-studied impact. EDCs [may be found everywhere](#) in modern environments, including pesticides, plastics, flame retardants, food, clothes, fragrances, pharmaceuticals, cooking and eating items, and personal care and cleaning products. [Adverse effects](#) of EDCs can be developmental, reproductive, neurological, and immune-related. Even [tiny amounts](#) can be harmful.

Common-sense strategies to minimize endocrine disruptors include consuming organic food; avoiding pesticides; using stainless steel, glass, or ceramic cookware and storage containers; staying away from air pollution whenever possible; washing new clothes before you wear them; and avoiding personal care, cosmetics, and cleaning products with added fragrance (other than plant oils) and chemicals with long names you can't pronounce.

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One of the most important ways to keep endocrine disruptors out of your body is to not eat animal foods. This is because most endocrine disruptors are fat soluble and accumulate in magnified amounts in animal fat. For example, the Institute of Medicine states that, for the EDCs' dioxins, "consumption of animal fats is thought to be the primary pathway for human exposure. In humans, dioxins are metabolized slowly and accumulate in body fat over a lifetime." This brings me to strategy three.

Balancing Strategy Three: Avoid Eating Animal Foods

All animal foods contain sex hormones that are often identical to the human versions. *This is true even for animals raised without added hormones.* All animals—including mammals, birds, and fish—need hormones for their own functioning. The hormones they produce become part of their tissues and secretions, which you consume if you eat meat, poultry, fish, eggs, or dairy.

Typically, the sex hormones you consume in the highest quantities vary with the type of animal food. Dairy and eggs contain the largest amounts of estrogen. For dairy, the soaring estrogen levels are tied to the fact that modern dairy cows are pregnant most of the year, and during pregnancy females become major estrogen producers. Testosterone exposure is strongly related to eating both milk and eggs (remember that your body may convert the testosterone to estrogen).

Hormones in animal foods are absorbed into your body. [One study](#) had adult men and children who had not yet reach puberty drink about 20 ounces of cow's milk. Both the men and the children had elevated levels of estrogen and progesterone (another female hormone) in both their blood and their urine after consuming the milk. Testosterone secretion was suppressed in the men.

A series of studies considered the changes in diet in Japan after World War II. In the 50 years from 1947 to 1997, intake of milk, meat, and eggs increased 20-, 10-, and 7-fold, respectively. During that time, the death rate from breast cancer roughly doubled, and ovarian cancer deaths increased by a factor of four. The death rate from prostate cancer increased 25-fold. The researchers consider that the estrogen in dairy may have been responsible for these dramatic increases in reproductive cancer death.

All three strategies to balance your sex hormones are important. Avoiding animal foods may be the most powerful—and the most overlooked.

[\(Additional references\)](#)