

Estrogen

For much of your life, estrogen fluctuates up and down. This occurs within the monthly cycle and also within the general framework of a lifetime. The degree and pattern of fluctuations are totally unique to you. So, too, are the ways your body reacts to the episodes of deficiencies and excesses created by the fluctuations. Deficiency-related responses are much more common than responses resulting from excess. Following are symptoms of both deficiency and excess, along with typical comments from my patients.

Common Signs of Estrogen Deficiency

- Mental foginess "I've lost my mind"
- Forgetfulness "I can't remember the birthdays of my grandchildren anymore"
- Depression "It's like I'm living in a dark tunnel"
- Minor anxiety "I can't seem to control my worries"
- Mood change "Sometimes I wonder how I'm going to feel tomorrow"
- Difficulty falling asleep "My mind is racing and I can't stop it"
- Hot flashes "This wave of heat spreads through my body"
- Night sweats "I wake up soaking wet"
- Temperature swings "I feel like a broken air conditioner"
- Day-long fatigue "I can't keep my head up"
- Reduced stamina "I can't push it like I used to"
- Decreased sense of sexuality and sensuality "I have lost all pride in my body"
- Lessened self image and attention to appearance "I could care less how I look"
- Dry eyes, skin, and vagina "My body is like a dry summer"
- Loss of skin radiance "I've lost my skin glow"
- Sense of normalcy only during second week of cycle
- Sagging breasts and loss of fullness
- Pain with sexual activity "I'm not lubricating as well"
- Weight gain, with increasing lack of concern about it
- Increased back and joint pain
- Episodes of rapid heartbeat, with or without anxiety
- Headaches and migraines "I seem to be controlled by pain that I never knew before"
- Gastrointestinal discomfort "I feel bloated"

Some of the above reactions occur nearly simultaneously whenever the level of estrogen falls. Most notable are hot flashes, inability to sleep, mental foginess, and emotional instability. The surprising news is that the symptoms improve very quickly as well, often within a half hour to an hour and a half after giving the body what it is missing: estrogen.

Common Signs of Excess Estrogen

- Breast tenderness or pain, occurring mainly in the central area, including the nipple "My breasts are too painful to touch"
- Increase in breast size "My breasts are swollen"
- Water retention (as notices in swollen fingers and legs)
- Headaches
- Weight Gain
- Impatient, snappy behavior, but with clear mind "People tell me I'm too bossy"
- Pelvic cramps with or without uterine bleeding "I'm back to cramps again like when I was younger"
- Nausea (less frequently) "I start to feel like I did when I was pregnant"

A woman with a high level of estrogen who is short-tempered and impatient tends to be in full control of her mind. Her thinking is crisp and clear. By comparison, an impatient woman with low estrogen often lacks the same mental sharpness and may experience mental fogginess. I often tell women that if their estrogen is low; they are more apt to receive sympathy and forgiveness. When it is high, they seem to have greater potential to irritate others and not be forgiven. There is a group of women, perhaps 5 percent, who naturally produce a high level of estrogen or who take a very large dosage of estrogen replacement without showing any sign of excess. In addition to monthly cycle and age-related fluctuations, the following can cause symptoms related to an increase in estrogen:

- Use of birth control pills
- Hormonal replacement with a higher level of estrogen than needed
- Fertility injections
- The presence of benign ovarian cysts

Unlike low estrogen, which can produce more immediate effects, the signs of elevated estrogen develop more slowly, over three to five days.

If you take too much estrogen, or if your natural level is too high, or if estrogen is not properly balanced with adequate progesterone, the lining of the uterus – the endometrium – will thicken. In response, the uterus will contract, inducing uterine bleeding and a sensation of pain or cramping in the lower pelvic area. Learning to balance your estrogen level will help you avoid uterine bleeding and the potential for irritability.

The Estrogen “Quick Check”

- Use twice daily (am & pm) to check your estrogen needs. This works for 95% of women.
- **Breast Check:**
 - Touch and feel your breasts.
 - If they are full, painful or growing, that generally indicates too much estrogen
 - If they have lost some of their fullness, or seem to be dropping, that means more estrogen is needed
 - The status of the breasts can be used as a yardstick for individualizing your dosage of estrogen replacement. Increase when your breasts are not full. Decrease if they are enlarged or painful.
 - These basic criteria will serve you well, provided you also take enough progesterone.
 - Women with breast implants cannot use this test to assess their estrogen dosage
- **The Ring Check:**
 - Do you wear rings? How easy are they to slip on and off?
 - Difficulty removing rings generally indicates too much estrogen. If the rings move easily then your level is correct.
- **The Sleep Check:**
 - How are you sleeping?
 - If you have difficulty falling asleep, experience restless nights, you might not have enough estrogen. If you awake drenched in perspiration, your estrogen level is very low. You need more. If you experience minimum hot flashes, your level is still not optimum. Take slightly more than you took the night before.

- **Mind and Mood Check**

- For many women, mental clarity and mood are extremely accurate measurements of estrogen replacement. Others, however, may find the mental and mood signs too subtle or overlapping to use as effective indicators.
- Not enough estrogen. Is your mind a little foggy in the morning? Are you feeling a little down? Confused? Not in good control of your mood? Don't care how you look? Your level may be lower than optimum. Take more than you took the night before.
- Too much estrogen. Are you feeling uptight? Irritated? But your mind is clear? Your level may be too high. Decrease the amount.