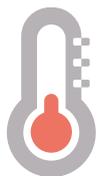
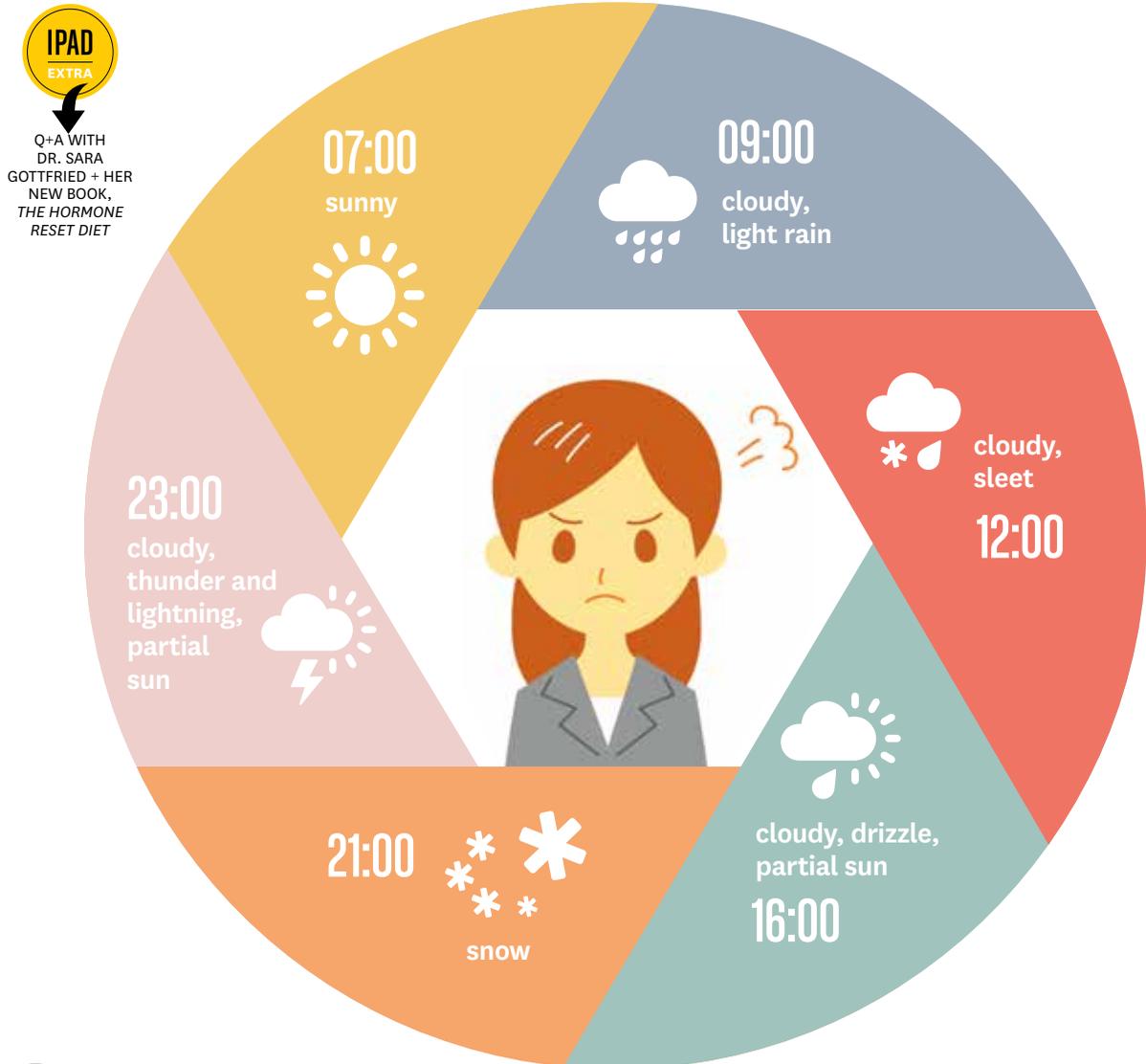


FEELING HORMONAL?

Whether you're battling PMS or staring down perimenopause, there are strategies and solutions to help minimize distress. *Juliette Lie Baxter* investigates how to manage hormonal changes with grace – and fewer mood swings.



THERE WAS A TIME WHEN A PAIR OF stretchy pants with a soft waistband that hugged my bloated belly and a loose-cut tee that skimmed over my achy breasts were all I needed to survive PMS. But things changed over a year ago, when I turned 41. Now I have a laundry list of monthly letdowns, which include increased anxiety, brief crying spells, fatigue

and heartburn. I have loose stools, foggy brain, ovulation pain and headaches. My cycle has stretched from 28 days to 38 days, which also means my PMS can last up to 10 days. I have hot flashes (that's a temperature surge with no sweats). And I get a yeast infection before and after my period, which is directly related to hormonal fluctuations (either too much or too little estrogen can spark the itch).

GIRL ILLUSTRATIONS, ISTOCK; OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS, CREATIVE MARKET

After complaining to my GP, she advised routine blood tests to check my iron and thyroid levels, which, if amiss, could explain my symptoms. My results came back negative. I'm in tip-top shape, but I still feel like crap. "You're just going through a hormonal shift," she said. This shift has me looking forward to being a Golden Girl, like Blanche or Rose (but definitely not Dorothy), when my period will finally be a memory.



symptoms that can range from weight gain and cravings to acne and insomnia, signalling a hormone imbalance. Later, when perimenopause appears, both estrogen and progesterone levels start to change, kick-starting another hormonal roller coaster.

While I'm flirting with perimenopause, along with many of my 40-something friends, the 30-somethings I know have their own complaints about worsening PMS. Traditional Chinese medicine practitioner Mary Wong says that, regardless of age or specific symptoms, our collective cups are overflowing. Between career, life, marriage and motherhood, we've been doing too much for too long and our bodies are crying out for a change. "PMS is a signal to let us know that we are not in balance," says Wong. "It's up to us to listen and take stock of our lives and alter the way we think, perceive and do."

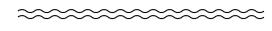
But how do you know if you're experiencing bad PMS or entering perimenopause? "The big clue is your cycles," says Dr. Esther Konigsberg, an integrative medical consultant based in Toronto and Burlington, ON. Her practice, Integrative Medicine Consultants Inc., integrates conventional, lifestyle, complementary and alternative medicine. "If you've been cycling every 28 to 30 days, then all of a sudden your cycle shortens, that's a sign you are entering perimenopause." Hot flashes, insomnia, vaginal dryness and a low sex drive are new annoyances that may appear. Once you start skipping periods, then you're officially transitioning into menopause.

DOING IT ALL TAKES ITS TOLL

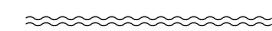
Natasha Turner, a naturopathic doctor and *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Supercharged Hormone Diet*, concurs. "Everything you do, say, think or feel impacts your hormones," she says. During our 30s and 40s, we're especially stressed out while we try to do it all. Prolonged stress depletes progesterone, the hormone that makes us feel calm, improves sleep, prevents breast tenderness and wards off mood swings. In its place, the stress hormone cortisol appears and, along with it, a personalized cocktail of

In light of my mixed bag of symptoms, what can I do to make it all better? My GP suggested a low-dose birth control pill or low-dose antidepressant, but is that really the answer? "These meds mask symptoms; they do not treat the underlying cause," says Dr. Christiane Northrup, a holistic OB/GYN and bestselling author, whose latest book is called *Goddesses Never Age: The Secret Prescription for Radiance, Vitality and Well-Being*. Her advice is to try pharmaceuticals when lifestyle changes aren't making enough of an impact.

Whether you're in your 30s, 40s or 50s, the feel-good prescription for balancing your hormones is less stress, better sleep,



BETWEEN CAREER, LIFE, MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD, WE'VE BEEN DOING TOO MUCH FOR TOO LONG AND OUR BODIES ARE CRYING OUT FOR A CHANGE.



SUPPLEMENTAL SIDEKICKS

TRY...

- **MAGNESIUM** before bedtime to help improve sleep and soothe nerves. You can choose magnesium citrate or glycinate to coax regular bowel movements. Most people are magnesium deficient, so you should aim for 400 to 800 milligrams a day for overall health.
- **CHASTE TREE EXTRACT**, iodized sea salt or iodine tablets to improve PMS and shortened cycles in perimenopause. Test them out on separate occasions to see which works best for you.
- **PROBIOTICS** to tune up your digestive system and help eliminate excess estrogen.
- **FISH OIL** to reduce inflammation, maintain a healthy heart, improve mood, support the nervous system and boost cognitive function.
- **VITAMIN D** to optimize healthy hormonal activity. It's also important for our bones and immune and nervous systems.

exercise and a healthier diet to help relieve a myriad of symptoms. “PMS tends to peak in our 30s and, if it’s not addressed it becomes perimenopausal symptoms on steroids – and menopausal symptoms can persist for years after menopause,” says Dr. Northrup. The bottom line: Get healthy habits in place now to make a positive change to your well-being later.



engage in regular pleasurable activities for the same feel-good effect. While you’re at it, nix alcohol and caffeine, which are two other common culprits found to increase cortisol, thereby spiking insulin, too.

Dr. Konigsberg is especially conscientious about eliminating bad estrogens that disrupt hormone balance, such as xenoestrogens, which are found in many pesticides. Choose organic when possible. She also suggests adding more cruciferous foods, such as broccoli and cauliflower to your diet. They contain indole-3-carbinol, a substance that changes the balance of our estrogens to less harmful ones, which may lower our risk of breast cancer.

You can also start filling your basket with superfoods that help reduce the inflammation that can lead to increased insulin. Consider blueberries as an antioxidant, lean organic proteins (they’re less inflammatory than fats found in processed meats), avocados for healthy fat, Greek yogurt for protein and lignan-rich ground flaxseed to sprinkle into smoothies and salads.

Don’t feel overwhelmed. “It’s simple: Wake up, go for a walk in the morning and eat more blueberries,” says Turner. “The hormonal impact of those two things alone is huge.”

Once you start feeling the boost of a better diet and more sleep, add exercise. If 20 minutes of yoga, walking or a Jane Fonda workout is all you can manage, that’s great, whether it’s three times a week or every day.

Most importantly, don’t beat yourself up over your changing hormones or panic if you enjoy Pinot and profiteroles on date night. That will spark unnecessary internal stress, and it’s okay to indulge a little now and then. “Hormonal changes are just a part of life,” says Wong. “It’s when hormones produce uncomfortable symptoms that this tells us something is off. Acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine, exercise, meditation and eating in accordance with one’s constitution as well as the environment will help bring back balance and alleviate hormonal disruptions causing PMS and other problems.” *hr*

THE WHEELS OF CHANGE

Between caring for your parents, finalizing that presentation and getting ready for the bake sale, strategizing a lifestyle makeover can easily fall to the bottom of the list. So, take it easy and work with baby steps. “Focus on improving your sleep first,” advises Turner. “It’s impossible to balance your hormones without enough sleep.” One of her tips for getting more shut-eye is using your bed for sleep and sex only. That means no TV or computers in the bedroom – or, at the very least, keep them six feet away and use the sleep function. They emit electromagnetic fields that disrupt the production of sleep-inducing melatonin.

Regarding sex, the more you have, the better your hormonal health. It alleviates stress, which reduces cortisol and contributes to a sounder sleep and a better mood. Whether you do it on your own or with a partner, regular nooky also increases estrogen and testosterone, which both wane as you age.

DIET DOS AND DON'TS

Once you’re getting better sleep (ideally, seven to nine hours a night), begin shaping up your diet with hormone-friendly food choices. A big hormonal letdown is sugar, so try to keep your intake to no more than 16 grams a day (the equivalent of four teaspoons), says Dr. Northrup. She explains that sugar increases insulin, which then throws progesterone and estrogen out of whack. “Sugar is more addictive than cocaine, so try stevia to sweeten things during your withdrawal,” she suggests.

If you need extra help boosting the happy neurotransmitters that sugar previously spiked, add more sex, meditation and socializing in your life and try to

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