

We often take it for granted, but our body is pretty amazing. Everyday it goes through hundreds of biological processes, which contribute to our physical, emotional and mental health. Dominating these chemical reactions is an ever-changing balance of hormones, and oestrogen is one of the key players that ensures these functions run smoothly. Best known for its role in female reproductive health, oestrogen affects us in more ways than we may realise.

But first, the science bit. Primarily made in the ovaries, with smaller amounts developing in the brain and fat cells, oestrogen is made up of three different compounds – oestrone, the main chemical present post menopause, oestriol, best noted for its rise during pregnancy, and oestradiol, the strongest of the three oestrogens with levels peaking during ovulation. Sometimes levels of the hormone can get out of whack and too much circulating oestrogen in the bloodstream (a condition known as oestrogen dominance), is thought to worsen reproductive conditions such as endometriosis and fibroids. When levels are balanced however, you can reap some great rewards. From enhancing your looks to helping you make your way up the career ladder – here's our rundown of the positive influences this hormone exerts on your wellbeing.

6 BENEFITS OF OESTROGEN

1 *It makes you happy*

As levels of oestrogen increase during your cycle, so too does the feel-good neurotransmitter serotonin. This means that leading up to ovulation you're likely to have a more positive outlook but pre-period and post-ovulation you might be in a grumpier mood. "Low levels of oestrogen can cause lower levels of serotonin. So your mood will be affected when oestrogen levels are lower particularly in the second half of the cycle," says women's health expert and leading UK nutritionist Marilyn Glenville (marilynglenville.com).

2 *It helps you to climb up the career ladder*

While testosterone is known for giving men their get-up-and-go, oestrogen is thought to work a similar way in women, giving us the competitive drive to succeed at every task we turn our head to. A study by the University of Michigan found that levels of oestradiol were highest in highly-motivated women and scientists concluded that oestrogen seemed to be a critical hormone for power motivation.

3 *It beats the excess pounds*

If you're struggling to fight stubborn weight gain, oestrogen could be the secret to boosting slim down success. "Oestrogen seems to cause

a decrease in appetite and research suggests it uses the same pathways in the brain as leptin, the satiety hormone," explains Dr Glenville.

4 *It gives you a gorgeous glow*

While excess hormones of oestrogen and testosterone can be the culprit of skin complaints like an oily complexion and acne, in the right amounts this duo can give us a lustrous glow. In a regular cycle, oestrogen peaks right before ovulation and testosterone levels are also raised. Together this combo can make skin appear more dewy. After ovulation levels of both hormones decrease which leads to a slight drop in collagen and elastin meaning skin might be temporarily less plump and youthful looking, but don't worry, once your next cycle starts your skin will be back to its former glory.

5 *It can relieve joint pain*

Calcium and vitamin D might be best known for helping to keep bones healthy, but adequate levels of oestrogen also play a role in joint health. In fact, research indicates that oestrogen, when taken in pill form could help to prevent osteoarthritis and reduce the rate of fractures associated with osteoporosis.

6 *It makes you more intelligent*

Yep, you read that right, oestrogen can increase our brain health. This is because the hippocampus part of the brain which is responsible for memory and mood can increase slightly each month with the rise of oestrogen in your cycle. As the hormone peaks at ovulation, (which on average happens around day 14 of your cycle), and then drops, it might mean that you're better placed to process important information. "We have oestrogen receptors

all over our body, including in the brain, and levels affect how clearly you think, along with your memory and your ability to focus and concentrate," shares Dr Glenville. Who knew?

HOW TO BALANCE YOUR OESTROGEN LEVELS

Overexposure to chemicals called xenoestrogens can disrupt the balance of regular oestrogen levels. Here we reveal some of the worst endocrine-disruptors and clever ways to outsmart them

WASH FRESH PRODUCE THOROUGHLY

Pesticides on shop-bought fruit and veg can have oestrogen-disrupting effects, but soaking and rinsing fresh produce in water with a tablespoon of apple cider vinegar can wash away traces from the skin.

OPT FOR ORGANIC BEAUTY BUYS

Sulphates, a chemical that's commonly found in cosmetics and toiletries can mimic the action of oestrogen, so seek out organic chemical-free options instead of mainstream buys.

AVOID PLASTIC

Plastic containers, bottles and other household items often contain BPA, oestrogen-like chemicals that enter the bloodstream and cause havoc on oestrogen levels. Swap plastic for stainless steel, glass or ceramic as these are thought to be far safer.

