



There's a lot to appreciate about hormones. They play a huge role in everything from getting pregnant to feeling happy to sleeping soundly. Unless, that is, your levels fluctuate—which, for better or worse, is a natural part of growing older. To shed a little light on these changes, it's first important to understand how your primary hormones work. Progesterone, which is produced by the ovaries and the adrenal glands after ovulation, maintains healthy cell growth in the uterus. Estrogen is created by the ovaries, the adrenal glands, and fat cells and prepares the uterus to accept a fertilized egg each month. Testosterone is made by the ovaries and the adrenal glands and regulates sex drive. And thyroid hormones (that's right, produced by the thyroid) control metabolism. Read on to learn how all of them impact you at different stages of your life—and what you can do to manage hormonal changes and feel good every step of the way.

IN YOUR 20s AND 30s

WHAT'S HAPPENING

These are your peak fertility years, and your menstrual cycle is probably pretty regular. "Hormone levels go through dramatic changes during your menstrual cycle," says Mary Jane Minkin, a clinical professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the Yale University School of Medicine. A surge in estradiol (a form of estrogen) about 10 days after the onset of your period, right around ovulation, induces a happy mood, while a boost in progesterone in the second half of your cycle can make you irritable.

YOU MIGHT NOTICE

► **A dip in your sex drive** if you use a hormonal contraceptive, like the Pill or a vaginal ring. "These contain synthetic estrogen, which blocks testosterone," says Bat Sheva Marcus, the clinical director of the Medical Center for Female Sexuality, in New York City. The good news? A new contraceptive pill

that contains natural hormones (and so may keep your libido intact) is under review by the Food and Drug Administration. (It's available in Europe as Qlaira.)

► **A drop in your fertility as you enter your late 30s.** If you are under 35 and trying to get pregnant and don't conceive within a year, see a reproductive endocrinologist to check for hormone-related fertility problems. If you're over 35, give yourself six months.

HOW TO FEEL BETTER

Studies have shown that eating cruciferous vegetables, like broccoli and cauliflower, can help keep estrogen and progesterone levels at the proper ratio, says Eva Cwynar, an endocrinologist in Beverly Hills. Yams and flaxseed oil may also be beneficial. To help curb severe PMS crankiness, Minkin suggests taking 1,200 milligrams of calcium a day, divided into three doses.

