

## Five Special Steps to Protect Your Hormones

My patient, whom I'll call Elaine, and I have both been concerned about the risk of breast cancer. We both have a strong family history. Elaine is concerned because she's childless; my late pregnancy at 37 offers me no protection. We have all known seemingly healthy women who had breast cancer, and ask ourselves, "Did they miss something? How can I stay healthy?"

Alice, on the other hand, is younger and her concerns are more immediate. "Why am I always tired? What's a regular period and why isn't mine regular? Will I ever be able to get pregnant if I can't even have a regular period?"

Elaine and Alice and I have each focused on hormonal risks particular to our ages and histories, but we all share—as do you!—the unique historical perspective of "swimming in a sea" of hormone-disrupting influences. You've encountered more environmental toxins this week than your grandmother did in a year! While it's perhaps impossible to separate oneself completely from those toxins, it is certainly possible to develop your own personal resistance and thrive in a hormonally hazardous world.

The task of staying safe in a chemically complicated world is one that deserves a bit of attention. The conventional suggestions are all valuable and important: don't smoke, drink plenty of chlorine-free water, eat organic food, use organic cleaning products, and get some exercise in the fresh air. Beyond the well-known steps you can take to break free of toxins' effect, there are some lesser known steps that are key to bolstering your body's resilience, particularly the interaction between the intersection of your brain and your body, all along your hormonal axis.

Let's look at a few slightly more unusual ways we can bolster our own resilience and the enjoy the fruits of healthy and balanced hormones.

### 1. Walkabout and Chill

Did you ever see the 1971 titled [Walkabout](#)? Two quite civilized children are lost in the Australian outback where they find protection in the company of a young Aboriginal man on his coming-of-age walkabout. In their time with him they have more sun, bug bites, fears, close calls and self-satisfaction they they could ever have dreamed of. One cut of the film (not all) ends with the three children diving and swimming together in the chilly fresh water beneath scenic falls.

While there are deeper themes in the film about conflicting modern and primitive cultures, I think of the inner journey of the two city children. I love the concept of facing a combination of both challenges and comforts that together enable you to be your bravest self. Too often in our modern lives we keep a steady level of stress response throughout our day. Our nervous and hormonal systems are better wired to face a stress, respond and then *let it go*. It's actually good for us to do something hard, endure it, and finish it with satisfaction. What can you do to

take steps slightly outside of your comfort zone and who will be your allies or protectors in that journey? You will be your first ally, and it is also important to surround you with friends who respect your adventure.

On a very miniature level—and bearing in mind that cold water is actually really good for you—**try a cold shower**. Before you think I'm crazy, let me defend this as a definite stressor, but one that is time limited and one that you can absolutely learn to tolerate, which builds your body's hormonal resilience. Here's how I do it: at the end of my usual shower, I turn the water cold for a minute. Your goal is not to shiver, shriek and endure (though that's fine at first) but rather to know that you can learn to be calm in the face of that miniature adversity. Tell yourself you're re-activating brown fat (which burns off of the body as it generates heat) and creating a sense of wellness. (Cold shower indulgers are not sick less often than other people, but they do perceive themselves to be more vigorous.) Want to try a cold shower? How else can you immerse yourself in cold water? How else can you face a challenge with equanimity?

## 2. Swallow Green

There are different kinds of green foods, but almost all of the foods that are naturally green offer special cleansing benefits. Rich in vitamins and anti-oxidants, some green vegetables play special roles in helping our body's cleaning crew. Our bodies are well designed to bundle up unwelcome molecules and send them out, by sweating, breathing, and flushing in urine and stool. Our brain has its own cleaning crew, that flushes out debris when we sleep well at night. Healthy hormones help us sleep well.

Here are my favorite green detox foods:

- **Cruciferous vegetables:** broccoli, cauliflower, brussel sprouts, and cabbage: think steamed vegetables with butter, or roasted with olive or coconut oil. Cauliflower is probably the most versatile of all: run raw cauliflower through your food processor and you can steam it up quickly as rice, or turn it into a pizza dough!
- **Cilantro**, you probably know, is only palatable to people with [certain genetics](#). So if you don't like sprigs of it in your salad or main course, make yourself a green smoothie with leafy greens (lettuce, spinach, kale), some lemon juice, half an avocado, and you won't even taste the small bunch of cilantro you throw in for special value!
- **Broccoli sprouts** are an easy sell: they look great as salad decorations, have a milder taste than full-grown broccoli, and are rich in sulphoraphane, an herbal compound well-known for its effectiveness in boosting our liver's ability to cleanse environmental and hormonal toxins. It turns out that sulphoraphanes are also helpful in cleaning out our brains! Degeneration in our brains invites the production of beta amyloid; rest and recovery and enable us to remove the beta amyloid and restore brain function. In a

mouse model, [recent evidence](#) suggests that sulphoraphanes turn UP the amyloid cleansing process in the brain. Sweep your brain clean with sprouts!

### 3. Clean Your Plate, Easy

When the US Dietary Guidelines suggested we all avoid saturated fats—and in fact reduce fats in general—they turned us away from butter and put margarine on our toast. Butter substitutes are still sold as healthy choices—though they're not!!—and never as tastier alternatives. Just as you probably know that butter is best (it's real food, has important vitamins and tastes better, for starters), it's also true that the fats that we buy in bottles deserve our careful attention.

Liquid fats are called “polyunsaturated” because the long carbon chains are not coated with hydrogen atoms, they are not “saturated” with hydrogen. Solid fats like butter and animal fats are hydrogen-coated and therefore saturated. Unsaturated fats are essential for health and come in three main forms, named omega-3, -6, and -9's, the number referring to the place in the chain where they first bend. A proper balance of the three types of polyunsaturates is highly important for the health of our brains, hearts, metabolism, and immune system. Here's the trick: omega-6 fatty acids sneak into our diet in so many places that they overwhelm the omega-9's (found in olive oil) and the omega-3's (found in fish and some nuts and seeds). Since it's the balance that is most important, almost everyone can benefit from a little attention to boosting the 3's and avoiding the 6's; here's a tip for each.

**Boost your omega-3's in the most brain-friendly way by eating fish or taking fish oil**, to consume the particular oils: DHA and EPA. Fish richest in these oils and lowest in toxins are termed the SMASH fish: sardines, mackerel, anchovies, salmon and herring. If you don't like or can't find fish, find a high-quality fish oil and buy it from someone who knows to keep it cool so it doesn't go rancid. Nordic Naturals carefully selects fish and prepares oil to meet high standards of purity.

**Make your own salad dressing.** Almost all commercial salad dressings sneak in a serving of omega-6's, disrupting your body's good balance of oils. Find an olive oil you think is tasty and mix it with lemon or vinegar, salt and pepper, and a bit of yogurt if you like creamy: your best salad dressing ever!

### 4. Clean Your Plate, Harder

Are you allergic to any foods? Food allergies can hide in plain sight. If you have any persistent health problem, it may be something you're eating, *even if* you have no apparent reaction when you actually eat that food. Allergies can become chronic, low-grade, and just like a stream wearing away a rocky surface, wash away your good health a little bit at a time. The inflammatory response of our immune systems can affect any organ system in our body. Responding to an allergen can also distract our detoxification systems from the work of clearing out environmental toxins.

Blood tests for allergies are rarely accurate and often expensive; the best test requires a bit of curiosity, time, and attention on your part. **An elimination diet** can start with the elimination of the two most allergenic foods: gluten-containing grains (wheat, rye, and barley) and dairy. I suggest taking both of them out at once, and this is *all the way out*. No gluten and no dairy for 6 weeks and then two different ways of paying attention.

**Are you feeling any better?** Some people notice right away as they eliminate those foods, that their skin clears up or their sleep is better. A convincing improvement is the best inspiration for keeping a provoking food out of your diet.

**Re-introduce slowly.** Starting with the food you miss the most, eat it two or three times a day for three days. Even if you didn't notice any improvement from the elimination (it can be subtle), it's often the case that the re-introduction makes it clear.

## 5. Take a Deep Breath

Working with Alice, she found improvement in many of her physical symptoms (acne, crampy digestive complaints) from some of the steps listed above. Elaine reversed her estrogen dominance by switching her skin care and housecleaning products to organic lines. Both women persisted with some evidence of dysregulation at the highest level: they continued to complain of a sense of stress and fatigue. Their sleep was not refreshing, and both of them found themselves with busy minds day and night.

Just as you've encountered by far more toxins than your grandmother ever did, you have also encountered more people, movies, books, and traffic jams in a week than she did in a lifetime! Newspapers, television, and traffic crowd our days seemingly uninvited; we crowd our own days with appointments, classes, and opportunities we want to pursue.

### **What is the best way for you to take a refreshing moment of silence?**

You may have heard of the practice of [forest bathing](#)—a great natural experience, more vernal and with less need for long sleeves than being lost in the Australian outback. Walking slowly through the forest, bathers are encouraged to approach the forest with a curious and detailed mind: how many different living things are close at hand in any place in the forest?

Forests are available at the edge of town and also at the edge of grassy fields. Your forest experience doesn't need to be a long meditative walk, it can simply be walking to the edge of the forest, large or small, taking a deep breath and **stepping into the shade**. Focus your eyes on a tree-shaded spot and find details of interest to hold your attention, softly. Become, just for a few moments, a forest-dweller.

You might be up for a bit of intentional meditation, widely researched and confirmed as a valuable tool for restoring a sense of calm, a better night's sleep, and a sharper brain while

you're at it. There are many helpful meditation apps and websites, but it can also be a simple do-it-yourself moment in time. Sit comfortably with your back straight and your head up. Close your eyes and pay attention to your breath as it passes in and out at your nostrils. Your mind will wander, and your reward is that you can bring your attention back to your breath. Each time you let go of the wander and return to the breath, you clear a bit of your life's clutter and give your brain room to thrive.

One of the most consistent benefits of meditation is help with sleep. Relaxation and sleep hormones emerge more easily from the busy brain of our modern lives. Peaceful sleep allows our brains to do their normal housekeeping, clearing the way for a precise and sturdy array of hormones to start our lives fresh on the next morning!