How Hormones Affect Depression

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Depression and Hormones

By now, you already know that depression tremendously affects the lives of many. Once it is established, depression has the ability to negatively impact a person's physical health, happiness and overall well-being.

Because of these effects of depression, experts are constantly looking for ways to better understand the causes and best treatments for the condition. One of the aspects currently under investigation is the link between depression and hormones.

Depression and Hormones

The association between depression and hormones makes sense when you consider the times when depression emerges most often for people. Many people experience depression during:

- Puberty, as the body is developing, changing and surging with hormones.
- Pregnancy, when a woman's body undergoes tremendous change as it creates and sustains a new life.
- Later in life, when men and women see erratic or steadily decreasing levels of hormones.

The likelihood of depression emerging during these life stages strengthens the link between hormones and depression.

Depressive Disorders Caused by Hormones
In the world of mental health, there are certain depressive disorders that can only affect women, due to the natural changes in hormones their bodies experience. Almost all depressive disorders involve low moods, changing sleep patterns and weight, low motivation, low energy, and thoughts of death. But depressive disorders caused by hormones vary from the others.

These depressive disorders include premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD), peripartum depression, and perimenopausal depression.

PMDD

PMDD is its own mental health condition listed by the American Psychiatric Association. As a separate condition, PMDD marks a departure from the expected symptoms that commonly accompany menstruation. Learn more about PMS and PMDD.

PMDD has symptoms including:

- Significant mood changes
- Increased irritability and anger

- Low mood, hopelessness and conflicts in relationships
- Anxiety and tension
- Low energy, interest and concentration
- Feeling out of control
- Physical symptoms like breast tenderness, swelling, pain and bloating

Peripartum Depression

Whereas PMDD is a unique condition, peripartum depression is a version of major depressive and bipolar disorders. A mental health profession will provide the diagnosis of major depressive disorder with peripartum onset or bipolar disorder with peripartum onset, when pregnancy and delivery spark the depressive symptoms. For those who have already been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, pregnancy can also trigger depressive episodes or make symptoms worse.

The term "peripartum" is preferred over "postpartum" because a significant number of women actually note the depressive symptoms starting during the late stages of pregnancy, so the condition is not just for new moms. Learn more about this condition.

Peripartum depression is more than the expected “baby blues”. The condition can bring about serious symptoms like:

Severe anxiety and panic attacks
Severe depression
Psychotic features where the woman may begin to have hallucinations and delusional thoughts

In the worst situations, the psychotic symptoms will include hallucinations directing the mother to harm herself or the baby.

Perimenopausal Depression

Menopause is a normal part of every woman’s life that comes with the end of menstruation. Unfortunately, it comes with moments of changing moods as well.

Before periods end, there is time of surging and falling hormone levels and inconsistent menstruation called perimenopause. Women commonly report higher levels of depression during this time.

Likely symptoms that accompany perimenopausal depression include:

- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Increased sadness
- Loss of interest and enjoyment in activities

Hormones and Depression in Women

The main culprit contributing to depression in women could be estrogen. During menstruation, pregnancy and perimenopause, levels of estrogen are very high or inconsistent, which may result in an increased risk of depression.

This link could explain the higher levels of depression reported by women during childbearing years. It could also explain why symptoms of depression decrease for many after menopause.

Men, Hormones and Depression

Men certainly also experience levels of depression, but overall, fewer men report symptoms of depression than women; the difference could be hormones.

Changing hormones could have the opposite effect on men than on women. For women, periods of high estrogen are associated with depression, but for men, high levels of testosterone seem to offer protection from depression.

This theory is supported by the idea that aging men and men with lower levels of testosterone, a condition sometimes called low T, have higher rates of depression than those with expected testosterone levels.

Addressing the Influence of Hormones on Depression

Of course, depression is a multifaceted condition that is influenced by many contributors, but it seems hormones can have some power over depression and depressive symptoms.

So, what can someone who is interested in decreasing the role of hormones on their mental health do to improve their moods? It seems there are two courses of action.

First, speak with your doctor about the connection you observe between your moods and your hormones. Encourage them to focus on the cause rather than the effect, by finding medications to address the hormones, instead of ones that target the depressive symptoms.

In this situation, various forms of birth control or hormone replacement therapy can offer good results for men and women.

Second, take action by seeking mental health treatment to address your depression. Speaking to a therapist and having an evaluation done by a psychiatrist can provide real strategies to address your hormone-related depression.

Not everyone will notice the contributions of hormones on their mental health, but those who do should take action. Exploring every strategy to manage symptoms is key to a healthy life.