

A young woman with dark hair tied back, wearing sunglasses on her head and a colorful tropical bikini, is smiling broadly while holding a large slice of watermelon. She is outdoors, with palm trees visible in the background. The text is positioned on the left side of the image.

If your migraines coincide with your period, they could be hormone-related.

when your HORMONES really are to blame

FORGET PMS: THESE BODILY CHEMICALS MAY BE RESPONSIBLE FOR A HOST OF OTHER PROBLEMS, FROM HEADACHES TO INSOMNIA. HERE'S HOW TO STAY IN BALANCE ALL MONTH LONG.

BY MARTICA HEANER PHOTOGRAPHY BY JUSTIN LOH

When even a sappy commercial can make you cry, you know the culprit: shifting levels of the hormones oestrogen and progesterone, which are responsible for that winning combination of crankiness, breast tenderness, and acne flare-ups. But PMS isn't the only side effect of fluctuating hormones. "These potent chemical messengers also affect how well you sleep, when you crave sex, and even how clearly you think," says Dr Scott Isaacs, author of *Hormonal Balance*, and a clinical instructor of medicine at Emory University School of Medicine. But you don't have to let hormones wreak havoc on your health. With a little planning, you can head off those highs and lows and feel like yourself again.

THE HORMONAL EFFECT:
**YOU CAN'T SHAKE THAT
THROBbing HEADACHE**

You may blame your pounding temples on that second glass of Syrah, but if your headaches seem to coincide with your period, it's a good chance oestrogen is responsible. In fact, 60 per cent of

migraine pain in women is related to hormonal changes, according to the National Headache Foundation in the US. "The dip in oestrogen right before menstruation causes a drop in pain-buffering brain chemicals like endorphins and serotonin, making migraines more likely," says Dr Susan Hutchinson, director of the Orange County Migraine and Headache Centre in Irvine, California. To know if your headaches are hormone-related, chart symptoms on a calendar for three months. Rank pain severity, note any associated symptoms (like vision problems or nausea) and record potential triggers like foods or activities. "If you experience severe headaches in the three days before your period or any time during it, you may suffer from menstrual migraines," she says.

*** Find balance**

Over-the-counter pain relievers, like aspirin or ibuprofen, as well as prescription migraine-prevention drugs, may offer short-term relief, but taking birth control pills continuously might also help manage your symptoms. Most oral contraceptives are designed to keep oestrogen

levels steady for a period of three weeks; it's during the oestrogen-free, or placebo, week that you get your period – and headaches. So talk to your doctor about possibly skipping the placebo pills and starting a new pack right away. It's also a good idea to avoid well-known migraine causes, like too little sleep, excess stress, wine and aged cheese. "These lifestyle changes may not prevent a menstrual migraine," says Dr Hutchinson, "but they can definitely make your symptoms less severe."

THE HORMONAL EFFECT:
YOUR BRAIN SEEMS TO BE ON VACATION

Have you ever spent 15 minutes banging out an e-mail that should have taken 30 seconds, or struggled to articulate an idea during a business meeting? Look at the calendar: You were probably about to get your period. Oestrogen levels drop during menstruation, which triggers a subsequent drop in mental acuity. "When there are high levels of oestrogen during ovulation, women experience a boost in their verbal skills," says Professor Pauline Maki, an associate professor in psychiatry and psychology at the University of Illinois, Chicago. That's when you're more likely to finish the Sunday crossword puzzle quickly or nail a work presentation.

*** Find balance**

"There are a few things you can do to compensate for your fuzzy thinking," says Prof Maki. To crunch through a pressing deadline, schedule a sweat-breaking workout. In a recent study, researchers from the University of Muenster in Germany found that regular runners learned new vocabulary words 20 per cent faster than those who had a less intense workout, or did nothing at all. The authors believe that the greater physical activity increases levels of certain brain chemicals that promote attention and learning. But don't forget to make time for sleep and relaxing downtime at the end of your day, since stress and fatigue can further drain your brain.

THE HORMONAL EFFECT:
YOUR SEX DRIVE'S GONE SOUTH

We usually associate testosterone with stimulating a man's sexual appetite, but this hormone affects a woman's desire, too. Levels remain fairly even

all month long, but there is a slight peak around ovulation, says Dr Nanette Santoro, a reproductive endocrinologist and professor at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. Call it nature's nudge for making babies. But many women start to lose this mid-cycle peak in their mid-30s, which may explain

lowered libido. Oral contraceptives may also dampen your sex drive. "The synthetic hormones in some birth-control pills can indirectly lower your body's production of testosterone," she says.

*** Find balance**

Switching birth-control pills may help. "Just don't forget that sex does

have a strong emotional component," says Dr Santoro. "Finding ways to make it more exciting or meaningful can significantly boost your desire." Even a seemingly minor change – a bikini wax or sexy new lingerie, for example – can reignite that spark.

THE HORMONAL EFFECT:
YOU HAVE TO LIE DOWN TO ZIP UP YOUR JEANS

If you're suddenly having a tug of war with your clothes, it may have little to do with last night's indulgent Italian meal. Although it's natural for your weight to fluctuate as much as 2.3kg in either direction due to fluid changes throughout the month, you're especially likely to feel as though you've plumped up before your period. "We believe that progesterone is responsible, even though we don't know exactly why," says Dr Santoro. "One explanation is that changing levels of the hormone slow the digestive process, making you feel more constipated, bloated, and gassy."

*** Find balance**

A few simple changes to your diet can bring down the bloat. Steer clear of high-fat meals, which take longer to digest. Eliminate known gas-producing foods, such as beans and cruciferous vegetables like cauliflower and broccoli, as well as carbonated drinks like soda. And even if squeezing into stretchy workout pants is the last thing you feel like doing, a daily bike ride or treadmill run will help you feel less puffy, according to a recent study in the *European Journal of Applied Physiology*.

“WHEN OESTROGEN LEVELS ARE HIGH, WOMEN CAN EXPERIENCE A BOOST IN THEIR VERBAL SKILLS.”

The researchers say daily cardio sessions can reduce PMS-related symptoms like bloating, possibly by lowering circulating levels of progesterone.

THE HORMONAL EFFECT:

YOU TOSS AND TURN ALL NIGHT LONG

Of course, a fight with your boyfriend or stress at the office will keep you up at night, but your hormones may have a greater impact on your insomnia than you realise. Researchers at the University of Arizona found that young women were less able to fall and stay asleep during the second half of their menstrual cycle (from ovulation through the start of their period) than they were during the first. “Rising and falling levels of oestrogen increase body temperature and disrupt the length of your sleep cycles, both of which can cause disturbances,” says Dr Gila Hertz, director for New York’s Centre for Insomnia and Sleep Disorders. Perimenopausal hormone shifts, which can start as early as your late 30s, also make it more difficult to get quality shut-eye. “Your body gradually produces less oestrogen as you age,” says Dr Isaac Gardner, a psychoneuroendocrinologist in Santa Rosa, California.

*** Find balance**

Changing your bedtime routine can ensure a better night’s sleep, regardless of what’s going on with your hormones. Start by dimming the lights throughout your home a couple of hours before bedtime. Shut down your laptop and turn your alarm clock around as well; these sources of light suppress levels of the sleep hormone melatonin, which can trick you into staying up longer. And

don’t rely on your television to lull you to sleep, says Dr Hertz. Even if the volume is low, the sound and flashing images can rouse you for a few seconds at a time throughout the night, leaving you feeling exhausted the next day.



Exercise could help combat hormone-related bloating and mental fuzziness.

Hormonal ebbs and flows It’s not your imagination!

Those fluctuating levels of oestrogen and progesterone may be responsible for a variety of common symptoms throughout your 28-day menstrual cycle.

