



**Ottawa Integrative Health Centre Inc.**

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New satellite office inside The Ottawa Birth and Wellness Centre - 2260 Walkley Rd. Ottawa

## Helping You Achieve Health . . . Naturally!

April 2017



### **Naturopathic Postpartum Health Care:** **The Role of Hormones**

*By: Dr Christine Nguyen, ND  
Naturopathic Doctor*

Life with a new baby is filled with novelty, excitement and emotion. It often also tests our limits with the challenges associated with learning how to care for this dependent little life, fluctuating hormones, physical/emotional recovery from the birth experience, sleep deprivation, lack of personal time and space, changing family dynamics and simply trying to juggle all the new information and advice that comes from welcome and sometimes unwelcome sources.

From a naturopathic perspective, postpartum support needs to address all of these and more. With a holistic focus, naturopathic doctors offer primary health care options to women who want a natural approach that equally addresses body, mind and spirit. A naturopathic doctor works with a woman – spends time with her, asks her many questions – to develop a meaningful rapport with her and to correctly identify the underlying root cause of her symptoms. This is key to allowing those root causes to be properly treated using gentle, safe and effective therapies.

*This article will focus on hormones and their role in women's health, specifically in the postpartum period.*

Hormones are chemical messengers, produced by different glands in the body. They move through the bloodstream, affecting cells of the body that have receptors for them. Hormone receptors exist not only in the body but in the brain, and therefore, can affect brain chemistry. Hormones work in concert with each other to maintain a constant environment inside our bodies. There is a complex interplay of so many hormones including both positive and negative feedback mechanisms within a woman. Many women's health issues are correlated to specific or a combination of hormonal imbalances. Some are physiological changes which we will describe below. Some are triggered by one or a combination of the following:

- Stress and overexertion
- Insufficient relaxation and play
- Improper breathing
- Improper diet
- Nutritional deficiencies
- Food sensitivities
- Environmental allergies
- Infectious organisms and/or imbalance in the intestinal flora (gut-brain barrier)
- Elevated blood sugar
- Exposure to environmental chemicals or to hormone disrupting chemicals
- Insomnia, shift work, sleep deprivation
- Light at night and/or lack of sunlight exposure during the day

Knowing this, it is important to reduce these potential triggers when & where possible as a preventive measure.

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# Recipe Corner

## CHINESE~ CANTONESE

### FRIED RICE

#### Ingredients

2 ½ cups	brown rice
½ cup	peas
½ cup	corn
4 Tbsp.	unrefined olive oil
2	skinless, boneless chicken breasts cut into 1" cubes
½	red bell pepper, chopped
2	green onions, chopped
2	eggs, lightly beaten
4 oz.	small shrimp, peeled and cooked
2 Tbsp.	soy sauce

- Cook rice as directed on box/bag.
- Steam vegetables in steamer until slightly tender.
- Heat a wok or skillet over medium heat with 2 Tbsp. of the olive oil.
- Stir fry chicken until completely cooked. Set aside on a plate.
- Pour slightly beaten eggs into pan. Tilt pan to spread thinly. Cook until firm underneath. Break up egg with a spatula and remove from pan.
- Wipe out the pan.
- Heat remaining olive oil over medium-high heat and add onion. Cook for 1 minute, then add cooked rice, tossing and cooking for 2 minutes.
- Add steamed vegetables, eggs, cooked shrimp, chicken and soy sauce.
- Cook and toss over medium-high heat until heated thoroughly.

Enjoy!

## **Now, onto the hormone changes and their impact...**

**Stress hormones:** Life with a new baby provides no shortage of stressors (even a positive stressor is a stress on the body). The body responds to physical and emotional stress by producing the stress hormones cortisol, DHEA, and the catecholamine hormones adrenaline and noradrenaline. The stress response, as described using the General Adaptation Model, can be divided into 3 stages. In the first Alarm Stage, these hormones are released into the blood and prepare the body for combating perceived dangers (increasing blood pressure & heart rate and making more energy available for fuel). This stage is characterized by the Fight or Flight response and is useful when physical action is necessary to escape danger. In today's modern world, there is little physical outlet for these subtle mental, emotional, or physical stressors.

When the stressors continue, as can be the case with the demands of early parenthood without adequate supports, the stress response moves into the Resistance Stage and is characterized by chronically elevated cortisol levels. Chronic elevations of cortisol can lead to a host of problems including those affecting the central nervous system, the digestive system, metabolism and of course other hormones. When this happens conditions such as body aches & pains, fatigue, insomnia, depression, anxiety, blood sugar dysregulation and IBS can develop.

If the stressors continue long-term without support, treatment or self-care measures, one can move into the Exhaustion Stage during which the adrenal glands react to the prolonged negative effects of elevated cortisol (bone loss, dysglycemia/insulin resistance). As a protective measure (or in a desperate exhausted state of depletion), the adrenal glands stop overproduction of cortisol, resulting in very low cortisol levels. Symptoms of low cortisol include fatigue, frequent illness/infection, and decreased recovery from exercise, allergies, low blood sugar, depression and low libido. This is best described as feeling 'burnt out'.

From a naturopathic perspective, attributing one's state of health to stress has far reaching implications for treatment and is not a dismissal. Furthermore, many of the disorders related to stress are not only a direct result of the stress itself, but are a result of nutrient deficiencies and increased by-products produced at the time of stress. With a clear understanding of the effects of stress hormones on the body, combined with nutritional assessment and testing of cortisol (i.e. via a 4-point salivary cortisol test) and proper treatment of each individual patient in her unique stage in the General Adaptation Syndrome, patients feeling overwhelmed during the postpartum period can get the support they need to cope with the stressors (good and bad) of early parenthood.

### **Reproductive hormones:**

In pregnancy, reproductive hormone levels in a woman's body rise significantly. At delivery, hormone levels drop rather abruptly and can thereby leave women riding an unexpected emotional rollercoaster.

Firstly, reduced progesterone in the postpartum period may be the underlying trigger for feelings of depression and anxiety. Symptoms include: fatigue, insomnia, and low libido.

Prolactin is a hormone which is produced primarily by the pituitary gland in the brain. Prolactin levels rise during pregnancy and in the postpartum period as it is the hormone responsible for stimulating milk production. Elevated prolactin works to inhibit estrogen and explains why lactating women's menstrual cycles are not restored for some time following delivery. The effects of elevated prolactin include reduced libido, in part because of its inhibitory effects on estrogen, and in part because of its inhibitory effects on dopamine. Dopamine is the neurotransmitter linked with motivation and reward in goal achievement as well as sexual arousal. I have seen new moms who used to be initiative-taking extroverts change dramatically over a few months to barely

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wanting any social interaction or unable to find reward in mini achievements. Reduced estrogen levels in the postpartum period can also lead some women to experience symptoms such as poor memory, depression, and poor sleep.

Therefore, proper assessment of the signs of hormone fluctuations in addition to testing female hormone levels during the postpartum period can give us clues as to where this interplay of reproductive hormones may be imbalanced and lead to targeted support of the underlying root cause(s).

### **Thyroid:**

In treating women in the postpartum period I always assess the thyroid to rule out an underlying thyroid disorder. Postpartum thyroiditis is a condition observed in 5% of all women within one year of giving birth. This condition is characterized initially by hyperthyroidism (an overactive thyroid gland), possibly followed by hypothyroidism (an underactive thyroid). Symptoms of overactive thyroid include: nervousness, restlessness, irritability, insomnia, palpitations, rapid pulse, increased hunger, weight loss, perspiration and intolerance to heat. Symptoms of an underactive thyroid gland include amenorrhea (lack of a menstrual bleed), low energy (especially in the morning), poor memory, slow thinking, numbness in the hands and feet, intolerance to cold (feeling cold all the time), hair loss, depression, anxiety, and inability to lose weight. As one can likely see, symptoms of hyper and hypothyroidism can easily be misdiagnosed as postpartum anxiety or postpartum depression or wrongly attributed to the stressors of life with a newborn. A thorough medical intake, physical examination and appropriate lab work including antibodies are all important to properly diagnose this condition

### **Conclusion:**

In closing, hormones play an integral role in health at all stages of a woman's life, but most notably during the period following

pregnancy. I am often asked: if these hormone changes are considered normal, why do some women have a more difficult time during this period than others and my response is that while hormone pathophysiology may explain one side of the coin, each woman is unique in her body, in her environment, in her diet, in her sources of support, in her coping resources. Therefore, a holistic assessment that considers mind, body, soul and environment is needed first and foremost. And whether they be stress hormones, reproductive hormones, or thyroid hormones, a thorough physiological assessment must rule in or out the role hormones play in order to adequately treat the root cause. Fortunately, from a naturopathic perspective, when it comes to postpartum health, women do have options.

### **References:**

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Rocky Mountain Analytical "Adrenal Function Information For Patients" Patient handout.

Postpartum Thyroiditis [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postpartum\\_thyroiditis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postpartum_thyroiditis)

# UpComing

## **Spring Into Yoga**

*Spring Yoga: That time of year when everything comes alive . . . Let your yoga practice awaken your senses.*

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### **Session Starting**

April 12 - June 20, 2017

### **Tuesdays**

Adaptive Yoga: 2:00 - 3:00pm

Unwind Yoga: 6:30 - 7:30pm

### **Thursdays**

Hatha Yoga: 10:30 - 11:30am

### **Naturopathic Doctors**

**Christine Nguyen and Erin Kasperek  
@ Kardish Women's Health Day**

**Saturday May 13, 2017 from 11-3pm**

Location: Kardish Health Food Centre,  
Westboro location: 332  
Richmond Road

*Stop by our booth to talk with  
Dr Nguyen and Dr Kasperek  
about hormones, fertility, acne, PMS,  
nutrition, fatigue, weight management,  
bioidentical hormone therapy, etc.*

*Play some natural medicine trivia and  
earn your chance to win a prize.*

*Sign up for our e-newsletter or speak  
to us to book a complimentary in office  
meet and greet.*

***For details, check out our May  
newsletter, our Facebook page or  
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