# Alternatives to HRT: Testing, Not Guessing

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*(Special thanks to Dr. Kenna Stephenson, clinical professor at University of Texas at Tyler, and member of the Scientific Advisory Network of Women in Balance. This is an excerpt from her recently published book Awakening Athena.)*

When hormone imbalance is detected early and steps are taken to correct it, progression to disease states may be prevented. To correct a hormone imbalance, I use the "test-and- treat approach," which involves assessing the patient's hormone levels and then providing individualized treatment such as customized dosages of bioidenticals hormones, if needed, and lifestyle and nutrition recommendations designed specifically for that patient.

The test-and-treat approach is far superior to the "guess and treat" approach that I was taught in medical school and residency and that is still used by many physicians. In the guess-and-treat approach, the patient reports her symptoms and the physicians guesses which hormones might be out of balance before prescribing a standard dose of a hormone.

If, at the follow-up visit, the patient's symptoms have not improved or her condition has worsened, her treatment is changed to another pre-selected dose of conventional hormone therapy. After several episodes of treatment with different hormones or changes in doses, a patient who reports no improvement is often treated with a drug to relieve anxiety or depression. If that therapy fails, she is usually referred to a psychiatrist or is told that "Your problems are in your head." or "There is no treatment left to offer." and is dismissed.

Unfortunately, the guess-and-treat approach is still far too common in clinical practice. Most physicians would never prescribe drugs such as a blood thinner or cholesterol-lowering medication without monitoring the patient appropriately.

**The Health Benefits of Treating Hormone Imbalance**

The precise diagnosis of hormone imbalance can motivate women to change their diet and lifestyle. Also, regular exercise, stress reduction, and good nutrition can favorably affect hormone production and metabolism. Having normal physiologic levels of certain hormones enables many people to feel well enough to adjust their diet and lifestyle. For example, women with a low progesterone level often crave sugar or are fatigued. Eating sugar-rich foods produces a fleeting feeling of energy but (coupled with a lack of exercise) causes weight gain over time. When I prescribe progesterone supplementation for such patients, they crave sugar less and have more energy. They are therefore more likely to exercise, make better food choices, and lose weight.

I provide each of my patients with a copy of her hormone profile. This snapshot of hormone status confirms that the patient's symptoms have a physiologic cause and can be used to educate spouses and children about the nutritional and lifestyle changes that will benefit the patient. One women in my care stated that her hormone profile was the topic of conversation during dinner on the day of her follow-up appointment. When she showed the test results to her family, her son

commented, “Gee, Mom, you’re hormone-free, just like the chicken that you buy at the market.” This patient’s spouse and children had realized that her hormone levels, which were at rock bottom, contributed to her symptoms of extreme fatigue and decreased stamina. Their new understandings validated the patient’s feelings and disproved the opinion that she “just wasn’t trying hard enough.”