

Hormone fluctuations and mood disturbances

Although mood disorders and depression may occur at any age during a woman's life, women seem to be more vulnerable during periods of hormonal fluctuations such as menstruation, pregnancy and peri-menopause, indicating in a recent study by the Society for Women's Health Research.

During times of hormonal flux, many women are able to be adaptive. However for others, a normal hormonal transition can trigger mild to severe mood disorders including depression and bipolar disorder. "Science has revealed clues as to why these changes may occur in some women, ...but further research is needed to definitively show what causes depression and mood disorders in women during hormonal transitions." said Dr. Peter Schmidt at the US National Institute of Mental Health's Reproductive Endocrine Studies Unit.

The Society for Women's Health Research and the US National Institute for Mental Health convened a thought leaders' roundtable last year to discuss current efforts to understand the effects of hormonal transitions — specifically pregnancy, postpartum and peri-menopause — on the occurrence of mood disorders in women. The report outlines the participants' views.

Roundtable participants observed that postpartum depression affects roughly 10 to 15 percent of women up to one year after childbirth, but the exact cause is not known. Some scientists believe that chemical changes in the brain may be caused by the shifts in hormone levels during pregnancy and the post-partum period, leaving women vulnerable to depression. It is believed that other life cycle changes in a woman's life such as peri-menopause where hormones are shifting may also produce similar emotional disturbances.

Scientific research conducted by Schmidt and Dr. David Rubinow of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill illustrated the effect of hormones on human mood by shutting down the ovarian cycle in an attempt to eliminate the symptoms of premenstrual syndrome. After two to three months of ovarian suppression, the study participants' problematic mood symptoms were greatly reduced. The researchers concluded that when reproductive hormones are removed, premenstrual symptoms or PMS disappears.

Despite our present understanding of the effects hormones have on a person's state of mind, more research is needed for better and deeper insight. According to the roundtable report, more studies are needed to distinguish precisely between the normal response to life cycle changes and the symptoms of depression. Moreover, more research is needed to figure out why some women are more susceptible to depression during hormonal transitions than others.

In conjunction with the report, the Society for Women's Health Research revealed the results of a recent survey polling doctors and their patients. The survey shows that many women underestimate their risk of depression and mood disturbances during hormonal transitions. "Women need to be critically aware of changes in their moods during key life cycle events," said Dr. Sherry Marts, vice president of scientific affairs for the society.

Source: Society for Women's Health Research