

health

Feeling tired and flat? Maybe you need to balance your hormones

Dr Sohère Roked is an advocate of naturally derived HRT medication. It's not witchcraft, she tells **Hilary Rose**

The word “holistic” often gets a bad rap for a good reason. It's frequently found alongside some nonsense about alternative medicine, crystal-infused water and how upping your intake of organic broccoli is an excellent alternative to chemotherapy.

Then along comes Sohère Roked, a GP and psychiatrist who left the NHS to specialise in something she calls “holistic integrated medicine”. She found that too often the medicine she practised consisted mainly of doling out drugs with no time to delve deeper. And so, while she was finishing her GP training ten years ago, she did courses about hormones and integrative medicine. Her colleagues told her it was quackery. Now they're not so sure.

“They all thought it was nutty, hippy medicine and a bit crackers, but things have definitely changed,” she says, sitting in the smart private clinic in Knightsbridge, London, where she practises. “My GP friends now say they wish they knew a bit more about it. It's not that the drugs don't work — they do, sometimes. If you're having a heart attack, you want the drugs. But when I started learning about hormones it all clicked into place. Lifestyle, nutrition, exercise and supplements are the pillars of health. But if the foundation isn't right, the pillars won't stay up, and the foundation is hormones. Get the hormones right and everything else benefits.”

One of her specialities, and the reason most of her clients are menopausal women, is customised bio-identical hormone replacement therapy (HRT). This form of HRT could be for you, she says, if your body doesn't get along very well with synthetic drugs. The



Dr Sohère Roked

difference, she says, is that these hormones have the same chemical structure as the hormones your body makes, and she prescribes them after doing a battery of diagnostic tests to find out which hormones need balancing. Oestrogen helps with hot flushes as well as concentration, focus, memory and urinary symptoms. If you're moody, having trouble sleeping, or suffering from fluid retention or thinning hair, it could be lack of progesterone although, she adds, there is some crossover.

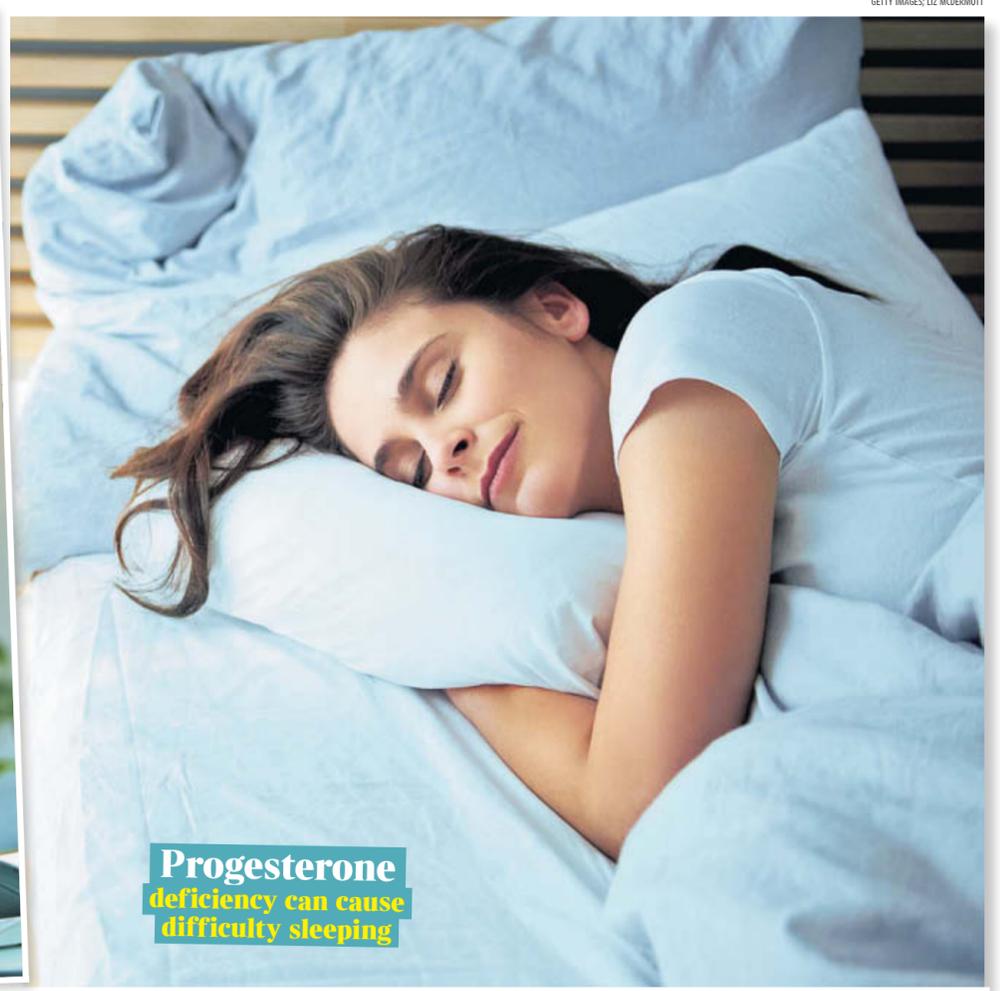
“When I was in general practice, if a younger woman complained of migraines and feeling flat, I'd think, ‘Maybe you're a bit depressed, have some antidepressants.’ As soon as I learnt about hormone balance, I started to think, ‘Maybe you need some progesterone.’”

It's not without controversy. There are two main types of HRT. Customised “compounded” bio-identical HRT and the regulated HRT prescribed by GPs, which closely mimics naturally produced hormones. According to the British Menopause Society, the former is made by “specialist pharmacies”, not the big drug companies, and hasn't been through the rigorous process of drug development undergone by conventional medicines. The latter has. The custom products aren't regulated by the UK's authorities because they are marketed as natural supplements and therefore do not require approval.

In 2016 the International Menopause Society advised against custom-compounded hormone therapy and warned that the expensive tests used in its diagnosis were largely unnecessary. It went on to express concern about the lack of regulation, safety and efficacy testing, batch standardisation or purity measures. Roked, however, is convinced that the pills she prescribes



Oestrogen helps concentration, focus and memory



Progesterone deficiency can cause difficulty sleeping

“Get the hormones right and everything else benefits

are effective and safe, subject to the patient oversight that is standard with any prescription.

She was born in England and grew up in Wales. Now aged 38, she read medicine at Southampton University, graduating in 2003, and went on to work in hospital departments ranging from A&E to general surgery and women's health. She practised for three years as a psychiatrist before becoming a GP. Two years ago she began working full-time in private practice, although she does some locum GP work for the NHS and out-of-hours shifts, partly because she values the training the NHS gave her, and to keep up to date with what's happening in the organisation.

At her private clinic an initial consultation is £265, diagnostic tests can cost £300. Roked says that on average the pills will cost £60 to £70 a month and possibly more, depending on what is required. She points out that some people may not need to take the pills for ever, that their body might start producing more of whatever hormone it is naturally, which brings us to one of her bugbears.

“People think bio-identical hormones are good because they're plant based, but that's not it. They're good because of the chemical structure.

One of the reasons I don't like it being called natural is because they're still made in a lab, using things like wild yam and soy. You don't get a bit of yam and rub it on your arm. This is medication.”

What she offers, if you've got the money to pay for it, is a personalised approach to managing your hormones given by a woman who has the time and the psychiatric experience to listen for as long as it takes to get to the bottom of why you're there. She's happy to send patients away, telling them that they don't need any of the things she prescribes, and is quick to point out that you can get bio-identical hormones on the NHS.

“Hormones are central to mental as well as physical health,” she says. “I probably see more people because their mood swings are intolerable rather than hot flushes. They feel like they're going crazy, they say, ‘I'm not myself any more.’ They're anxious, they can't focus, they get overemotional about things they wouldn't have done ten years ago, and their mood can go from zero to crazy angry and back. It feels out of control and they come to get it fixed, because they're just existing, not living.”

If you've always been an anxious, irritable person, you can't suddenly blame your hormones when you hit the

menopause, which comes as a shock to some of her patients. And, as she points out, 100 years ago 50 was old and life expectancy considerably shorter. Today you can hope for decades of life beyond that, so why would you put up with feeling rubbish during them? Or before, come to that — she sees some women in their twenties and thirties who spend half their menstrual cycle feeling wretched and come to Roked to get it fixed. She takes a progesterone tablet herself to help to counter PMS.

“You don't have to put up with it now. I think life's a lot busier today and what can be managed safely is a good thing. As women, we think we have to put up with this. Maybe you do for certain things, but maybe not for others.”

When she was starting out, doctors were taught to be wary of HRT because of concern over possible links with breast cancer. She says that those fears have been disproved and she quotes a Danish study of more than 1,000 women, half of whom were on HRT and half of whom were not. “The women on HRT had a 40 per cent reduction of all causes of mortality compared to the group that didn't.”

So is there an argument for all women to take HRT? “No, it needs to be looked

“You don't rub a bit of yam on your arm. This is medication

at on an individual basis. If every person in your family has had breast cancer, for example, then it might not be the best thing for you, because taking oestrogens in any form, even the ones you produce yourself, can stimulate cancer cells.”

She looks appalled at the idea of someone seeking out a “natural” alternative to common breast cancer drugs such as tamoxifen or Herceptin and says that any treatment she might offer such women would be non-hormonal and complementary to their prescription drugs, not instead of them. She tells the story of a friend of hers, an NHS GP, who saw a man who was on a variety of blood-pressure medication because he had a history of strokes.

“A holistic practitioner had told him to stop his medication and take herbs instead. Now that I have a big issue with. It's not safe! You have to see someone who understands both sides of the coin. First and foremost I'm a doctor, and that's one of the reasons people choose to see me. My medical experience is always at the forefront of my mind, but I can offer the supplements and time that maybe an NHS doctor can't. Holistic just means looking at the whole person. I'm not doing witchcraft in the corner.”