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Testosterone Disorders In Women and Men

Most people know that testosterone plays an important role in men's health. But women have testosterone too. It's important for health and well-being in women, the same as it is in men. Blood testosterone levels that are too high or too low can be a sign of certain medical conditions. It's important to test for testosterone levels in people who have symptoms of these conditions.

Testosterone in women

Women have less testosterone than men do. But it does some of the same things in women as it does in men. It helps maintain:

- Bone strength
- Lean muscle mass
- Sex drive
- Energy levels

Women also use it to make estrogen, the main female hormone.

Too much testosterone

Sometimes women have too much testosterone. The most common cause is polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). About 4% to 8% of women of child-bearing age have PCOS.¹ It's becoming more common, but researchers don't know why. Nor do they understand what causes it. PCOS can occur in more than one family member, so the cause may be partly genetic. But factors in the environment also seem to play a role.

Symptoms of PCOS

PCOS symptoms vary from woman to woman. The most common are:

- Irregular or no menstrual periods
- Excessive hair growth on the face and body
- Weight gain
- Acne
- Thinning scalp hair
- Inability to get pregnant



PCOS—a distressing condition

PCOS can affect a woman's:

- Identity
- Sense of worth
- Enjoyment of life
- Mood

PCOS can also lead to mental health disorders. These include:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Bipolar disorder

One study found that 35% of women with PCOS had depression. In contrast, only 11% of those without PCOS were depressed.²

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Treating PCOS

There is no treatment to cure PCOS. So doctors try to decrease symptoms and prevent problems. Birth control pills can help decrease symptoms in women who don't want to get pregnant. On the other hand, certain medicines can help women who do want to get pregnant.

A healthy lifestyle is important to prevent problems. The goal is to prevent heart disease, diabetes, and being overweight or obese. Women with PCOS are at risk for these conditions. Approaches include:

- Losing weight if needed
- Exercising
- Eating fewer processed foods
- Eating more fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain products

Testosterone in men

Men need testosterone to:

- Keep their muscles and bones strong
- Maintain normal mood and energy level
- Maintain interest in sex
- Produce sperm cells
- Have an erection

Testosterone levels change as a man gets older. They reach a peak in early adulthood. After age 30, they start to decline. So energy and sex drive can decline as a man ages. These changes may be due to the normal fall in testosterone level. But sometimes a man's testosterone level can get too low. This condition is called "low T" (male hypogonadism).

Symptoms of low T

Symptoms include:

- Decreased interest in sex
- Erectile dysfunction
- Low sperm count
- Poor concentration and memory
- Hot flashes

Factors that affect testosterone levels in men

A man's testosterone level is affected by age. But other things can affect it too. These include:

- Being overweight
- Some physical conditions like diabetes
- Some mental factors like depression
- Use of too much alcohol
- Level and type of physical activity

What you can do

If you are a woman with symptoms of PCOS or a man with symptoms of low T, talk with your doctor. He/she may want to measure your testosterone level. This will help figure out whether you have one of these conditions.

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- Increased breast size
- Depression
- Decreased energy
- Osteoporosis
- Decreased muscle mass and strength
- Increased body fat
- Hair loss

Treating low T

Doctors use different treatments for men with low testosterone. One option is to treat the condition that is causing the low testosterone. Another option is to give the patient testosterone. Testosterone is available in several forms:

- Injection into a muscle
- Pill that is swallowed (not recommended)
- Tablet that is attached to the gum
- Gel applied daily on the skin
- Patch applied nightly on the skin
- Pellets inserted under the skin

Testosterone therapy is not for everyone, though. Men who opt for testosterone treatment may need to be treated for life. And there may be side effects. Men who have low T should talk with their doctor about all the risks and benefits.

Additional information

You can find more information about PCOS at these Web sites:

- U.S. National Library of Medicine: nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001165.htm
- The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists: acog.org/Patients/FAQs/Polycystic-Ovary-Syndrome-PCOS
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: womenshealth.gov/publications/our-publications/fact-sheet/polycystic-ovary-syndrome.html

You can find more information about low T at these Web sites:

- U.S. National Library of Medicine: nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/007581.htm
- Healthline: healthline.com/health/low-testosterone
- WebMD®'s Men's Health Testosterone Directory: webmd.com/men/testosterone-directory

References

1. Sirmans SM, Pate KA. Epidemiology, diagnosis, and management of polycystic ovary syndrome. *Clin Epidemiol.* 2013;6:1-13.
2. Hollinrake E, Abreu A, Maifeld M, Van Voorhis BJ, Dokras A. Increased risk of depressive disorders in women with polycystic ovary syndrome. *Fertil Steril.* 2007;87:1369-1376.