

Female Hormone Profiles



Why Profiles?

When patients have hormone-related symptoms, it is usually not a clear-cut case of one hormone level being abnormal, or even one hormone system. In fact, because of the role that hormones play as chemical messengers to wake up the genome in specific target tissues throughout the body, it makes sense that all hormone systems work in concert with each other to maintain a state of balance. This could be likened to the instruments in an orchestra playing together in harmony; when one instrument is off key or playing too loudly or softly (analogous to too much or too little hormone), the overall harmony is affected. In a similar manner, the adrenal, thyroid, and sex hormones work in harmony, and when one or more of the hormones in any one system become unbalanced, this affects the harmony or balance of the whole system. Symptoms common to hormonal imbalances in the endocrine systems are seen as the body struggles to maintain balance, but does not succeed. Without an overall picture of which hormone systems are affected, it is often difficult to know the best clinical course of action for correcting the imbalance.

Hormone "Profiles" at ZRT are multiple hormone tests bundled into one convenient kit. Priced lower than the sum of the individual tests, these provide a more economical method to assess a patient's overall hormonal status, giving a better picture of the hormone imbalances that are causing symptoms. Instead of treating a secondary hormonal imbalance caused by an abnormality in only one of the hormonal systems (e.g., hot flashes caused by low estradiol), you can address the underlying issues that lie at the root of the problem, and therefore, better guide your patients towards overall wellness.

Blood Spot or Saliva Profile?

A variety of profiles is offered, using saliva only, blood spot only, or a combination. These are described in more detail under "Which Profile?". Some hormones (estradiol, progesterone, testosterone, DHEA-S and cortisol) can be determined in either blood spot or saliva, and so your choice depends on which of these is the most suitable for the individual patient. Saliva is an excellent way to assess sex and adrenal hormone levels in women, and we find a good correlation with symptoms. However, in individuals who produce very little saliva, saliva collection may not be possible

and in those who use hormones in a sublingual or troche supplement, saliva hormone testing is not appropriate and blood spot testing is a better choice. In individuals using sublingual hormones, it is difficult to know how much of the hormone in saliva results from direct saturation of the oral mucosa and salivary glands (resulting in false-high salivary levels) versus how much hormone is entering the salivary gland and saliva from the blood circulation.

Near-identical results are found from conventional blood serum (venipuncture) testing and finger-stick capillary blood spot testing¹⁻³. This makes blood spot testing a convenient alternative to serum testing for endogenous hormone evaluations. However, blood spot testing is superior to conventional venipuncture serum testing when hormones are delivered as a topical cream or gel, or a troche. When individuals use hormones that are absorbed topically (through the skin) or absorbed through mucous membranes (troches, sublingual drops, vaginally), blood serum levels show very little increase. In striking contrast, salivary and blood spot levels of these sex steroids increase, demonstrating that the hormones have entered tissues of the body. Why? Hormones measured from saliva or capillary blood represent the free or bioavailable fraction of sex steroids in blood that travel to the tissues. In contrast, venous blood on its way back to the heart, is depleted of its bioavailable hormones and more representative of the amount of hormone that was *not* delivered to the tissues. This makes the saliva or finger-stick capillary blood spot assay superior to conventional serum (venipuncture) testing and helps prevent potential overdosing. For a full, referenced discussion of these phenomena, please see our Provider Data Sheets "About Blood Spot Testing" and "About Saliva Testing".

(continued inside)

Hormones Tested in the Female Profiles and Why

Estradiol and progesterone levels and their ratio are an index of estrogen/progesterone balance. An excess of estradiol, relative to progesterone, can explain many symptoms in reproductive age women including endometrial hyperplasia, pre-menstrual syndrome, fibrocystic breasts, and uterine fibroids⁴. In older women using estrogen supplements alone, a deficiency in progesterone can also result in symptoms of estrogen dominance, which include weight gain in the hips and thighs, fibrocystic and tender breasts, uterine fibroids, irritability, water retention, and thyroid problems. These symptoms are also seen in some women approaching menopause, whose estrogen levels swing wildly from high to low without the balancing effects of progesterone. If estrogen dominance is not corrected, it can lead to cancers of the uterus and breasts, and insulin resistance⁵. With the onset of menopause, when ovarian estrogen and progesterone production declines, a new subset of symptoms can result from low estradiol levels, including hot flashes, night sweats, vaginal dryness, sleep disturbances, foggy thinking, more rapid skin aging, and bone loss. Maintaining appropriate levels of estradiol, adequately balanced with progesterone, at any age is essential for optimal health.

Testosterone levels can also be either too high or too low. Testosterone in excess, often caused by ovarian cysts, leads to conditions such as excessive facial and body hair, acne, and oily skin and hair. Polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) is thought to be caused, in part, by insulin resistance. On the other hand, too little testosterone is often caused by excessive stress, medications, contraceptives, and surgical removal of the ovaries⁶. This leads to symptoms of androgen deficiency including loss of libido, thinning skin, vaginal dryness, loss of bone and muscle mass, depression, and memory lapses.

SHBG is a protein produced by the liver in response to exposure to any type of estrogen, whether produced naturally by the body, consumed as a synthetic oral contraceptive estrogen, estrogen therapy, or as foods or herbs (phytoestrogens). Released from the liver into the bloodstream, SHBG binds tightly to circulating estradiol and testosterone, preventing their rapid metabolism and clearance and limiting their bioavailability to tissues. SHBG gives a good index of the extent of the body's overall exposure to estrogens. The SHBG level is also used to calculate free (unbound) testosterone levels when blood spot is used instead of saliva to measure sex hormones⁷.

DHEA, mostly found in the circulation in its conjugated form, DHEA sulfate (DHEA-S), is a hormone produced by the adrenal glands, and levels generally reflect adrenal gland function. It is a precursor for the production of estrogens and testosterone, and is therefore normally present in greater quantities than all the other steroid hormones. Its production is highest in the late teens to early 20s, and declines gradually with age. Like cortisol, it is involved with immune function and a balance between the two is essential. Low DHEA can result in reduced libido and general malaise, while high DHEA can have masculinizing effects on women because it metabolizes to androgens, including testosterone. Because of its conversion to estrogens and androgens, it is important to monitor levels of these hormones, as well as levels of DHEA, during supplementation⁸.

Cortisol is an indicator of adrenal function and exposure to stressors. Under normal circumstances, adrenal cortisol production shows a diurnal variation and is highest early in the morning, soon after waking, falling to lower levels in the evening. Normal cortisol production shows a healthy ability to respond to stress. Low cortisol levels can indicate adrenal fatigue (a reduced ability to respond to stressors), and can leave the body more vulnerable to poor blood sugar regulation and immune system dysfunction. Chronically high cortisol is a consequence of high, constant exposure to stressors, and this has serious implications for long-term health, including an increased risk of cancer, osteoporosis, and possibly Alzheimer's disease⁹.

The Thyroid Profile (free T4, free T3, TSH, and TPO) can indicate the presence of an imbalance in thyroid function, which can cause a wide variety of symptoms, including feeling cold all the time, low stamina, fatigue (particularly in the evening), depression, low sex drive, weight gain, and high cholesterol. Thyroid deficiency can also be a cause of infertility, which is why these tests are included in the Female Fertility Profiles.

LH and FSH tests are included in the Female Fertility Profiles to give information on the possible presence of ovarian insufficiency (elevated FSH) or PCOS (elevated LH/FSH).