

*Patient Advocates Ltd*  
**Natural Hormone Therapy**

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**Dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA)**

DHEA is the most abundantly produced of the sex steroid hormones. Both men and women produce DHEA, predominantly in the adrenal glands but also in the skin and the brain. And it works with your other sex steroid hormones in many interrelated ways. DHEA can cascade into both testosterone and oestrogen, which means that it can come to your aid if those important hormones are fluctuating or in decline. It also has important properties on its own.

A foetus begins manufacturing DHEA during the second trimester of pregnancy. Because DHEA is such a powerful immune stimulant, the expectant mother's body steps up production of it during her pregnancy to further protect the developing child.

DHEA also works on the mother's cervix to help during delivery. After birth, it is believed that a baby actually bonds with its mother on the basis of the scent, which just happens to be a DHEA-dependent response. DHEA is a precursor to your pheromones, those magical chemicals that emit your particular scent and act on your brain in response to the scent of others. Could it be that DHEA even influences how you choose your mate?

When you are sick, DHEA aids in your fight against bacterial and viral invasion by mobilising your immune system to recognise intruders and form antibodies to combat them. It appears to play a role in helping your antibodies remember the invaders so they can identify them during future invasions. This means that DHEA is hard at work protecting you from everything from the common cold to cancer.

Many studies have shown that DHEA helps keep cholesterol in check and plays a role in reducing the formation of fatty deposits in the arteries associated with heart disease. It has also been shown to prevent blood clots and to provide protection against diseases like lupus and diabetes. Recent studies have also determined that DHEA may promote bone growth and reduce a woman's risk of osteoporosis, and it has been shown to be instrumental in weight loss.

Brain tissue contains five to six times as much DHEA as other tissues in the body. DHEA has been shown to improve brain function and cognition, which means that it can help you learn new things, remember them once you have learnt them and answer questions about them when you are asked. Interestingly, people with Alzheimer's disease have been found to have DHEA levels that are half that found in healthy people their age. DHEA can also work as an antidepressant and enhance a person's feeling of well being. It appears that DHEA plays an important role in maintaining not only a healthy mind but a positive attitude as well.

While most of the research that has been done on DHEA has been in animal studies, more and more human studies are being done all the time. And the evidence is mounting that DHEA is an important hormone that plays a key role not only in how healthy you are and how long you stay that way, but in your overall sense of well-being as well.

One of the DHEA's most important functions is in its role as one of your body's built-in shock absorbers. In much the same way your automobile shocks absorb the hardships of the road, DHEA helps you handle the shocks of life – stresses that could otherwise wreak havoc in your body.

What kinds of stresses are these? Scientifically, as far as the body is concerned, stress is defined as a “synergy of endocrinological impairments that creates a syndrome”. Loosely translated, that means that stress comes about because you have an effect on your hormones and your hormones have an effect on you. Sometimes the things that go on in your life can put a burden on you physically by causing endocrine, or hormonal, events to go on in your body. Medical experts now believe that this is at the root of many degenerative disease processes. In other words, stress has a biological as well as an emotional effect on you, and, over time, it can diminish your body's ability to fortify, protect, regenerate and heal itself.

Stress can be triggered by emotions, like anger, fear, worry, grief or guilt. It can be the result of an injury or trauma, an accident or surgery. An extreme change in diet, exercise, sleep patterns, or even the climate you live in can create stress as well. So can chronic illness, pain, allergies, or inflammation. Too much work, too much play, or too much of anything can create stress. But isn't stress a part of life, and isn't the body supposed to be able to cope with it? Yes. You are born with an innate ability to adapt to the demands of life and even to go beyond your normal limits of endurance when circumstances require you to do so. Your body is designed to recover when you are exhausted, and to get back up when you are knocked down. But there is more to this equation than you might think.

When you face extraordinary stress of any kind, the hormone cortisol floods your system. Cortisol is a stress-induced hormone that helps you muster up the energy you need to “fight the tiger”. Once you have managed the stressful circumstance, your brain shuts off the production of Cortisol and DHEA enters the picture to restore calm and bring your body back into balance. In an intimate partnering, DHEA and Cortisol work together to help you respond to stress, and then recover from it. Depleted adrenal glands can be at the root of many serious chronic illnesses. DHEA and Cortisol levels are a very important part of your hormone profile. Knowing what they are, can give you important information about how the stresses of your life are affecting your body.

These are your sex steroid hormones. The powerful influences they have on you as you age might make you wonder why, just when you need them, they are beginning to disappear. You would think that because they have such a great impact on us, we would naturally always have them – that our bodies would go on producing them indefinitely. But maybe there is something to that old adage, “Youth is wasted on the young”, especially when it comes to hormones. Do we completely understand why? Not yet. But because we do know they are vitally important to maintaining our health and our sense of well being, an enormous amount of research is being done on them.

Not surprisingly, your sex steroid hormones seem to be inextricably tied to your reproductive capacity. When it stops, they decline. There is an interesting little wrinkle in this design, however. Although your hormone levels go down, your hormone receptors do not. So if you take replacement hormones, your hormone receptors seem to perk right up and respond. You begin to feel and look younger and have more protection against disease. This is the basis for the practice of natural hormone replacement therapy.