

Estrogen-Progesterone Energetics

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Hormonal imbalances, especially female hormonal difficulties are extremely common in clinical practice. The following discussion aims to examine common estrogen-progesterone rhythms in terms of an energetic structure. My previous article in *UnifiedEnergetics* (Fall 2006), "Doctrine of Signatures," would serve as a helpful background to this article.

The Four Elements Theory

I have found the four elements theory a serviceable tool for considering herbal qualities, bodily pathologies and constitutional energetics. This simple model uses four main energetic qualities; Earth, Air, Fire and Water as a philosophical tool for examining all matter. Earth energy is solid, downward and dense; hence, pathologies which are excessively "stuck," hard and sedentary would represent an excess of Earth energy. Air is upward, outward and quick of motion, hence pathologies which are excessively manic and restless, like the wind, would typify excessive airiness. Water is cold, damp and capable of harboring electromagnetic currents, hence pathologies where there is excessive fluid retention or susceptibility to external energies would represent excessive Water energy. And lastly, Fire is hot and volatile, hence pathologies where people are "hot headed," quick to excite or anger are typical of excessive fiery energy, as are acute fevers and rapid onset of inflammation.

While all people are composed of all four elements, in most diseases (both physical and psychological), one or more types can be excessive, with the remainder being deficient or overpowered. When applied to the female menstrual cycle and its cyclical rhythms, this model can be enlightening to clinicians

devising appropriate treatments, and to women themselves for better self-understanding. Both Earth and Water have a downward, inward propensity. Paracelsus and the ancient alchemists spoke of the "salt" principle – the propensity to form bonds and become solid. Earth elements are those salt-forming minerals (such as calcium and silica), and Water is well known to assist minerals in interacting with one another. Therefore, both Earth and Water elements display "salt-like" propensities and are both downward, inward and tend to form solid mass. The "sulfur" principle is the opposite of salt – the propensity to break bonds and release energy. Fire and Air elements are both outward and etherealizing, displaying the "sulfuric" principle.

The Four Elements and Estrogen-Progesterone Energetics

When applied to the menstrual cycle, one might see ovulation, the most inward, fertile, mass-forming point in the cycle, as the most "salt-like" moment in the month. The menses itself would be the most outward, infertile, mass-breaking or releasing moment in the monthly rhythm, or the most "sulfuric." *Figure 1* In traditional Chinese medicine, the concepts of yin and yang might be roughly juxtaposed upon this four elements philosophy. Yang is hot, releasing and outward – sulfur-like and most expressed during the menses. Yin is moist, inward and fertile – salt-like and most expressed during ovulation.

Estrogen is the most sulfur/ yang of the two main menstrual cycle hormones. The word estrogen comes from *estrus*, meaning to menstruate. Estrogen is the hormone that causes a buildup of the endometrial lining, which is shed during menstruation – the sulfuric principle is displayed here as an outward and



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releasing activity.

Progesterone in this model is the most salt/yin of the two hormones. The word progesterone comes from the fact that it is “pro-gestational,” meaning it enables gestation (pregnancy). When progesterone is added to the monthly cycle, the proliferating effect of estrogen on the endometrial lining is altered; instead of building higher and higher, the endometrium develops many inward nooks and crannies under the influence of progesterone. The salt principle is displayed here as an inward and holding-on activity. *Figure 2*

When all four elements, and when yin/yang, sulfur/salt are perfectly balanced, the menstrual cycle might be a perfect lunar rhythm where a woman menstruates with the full moon and is fertile with the new moon in a perfect, 28-day cycle. However, the menstrual cycle is also an opportunity for a woman’s body to correct a yin/yang imbalance.

For example, a woman with excessive fiery energy would tend to express more sulfur or yang symptoms. For her, the menstrual cycle might be an opportunity to release some of this excess fire. She may have cycles shorter than 28 days and have heavy bleeding which serves to balance her constitution.

In the opposite scenario, a woman with deficient fire or yang energy might balance herself by holding on to the blood. She might have cycles longer than 28 days with fairly moderate or even scant blood flow. This is useful for a clinician to understand. In many cases, the menstrual cycle is a window into our patients’ constitutions. One would not try to force a yang/sulfur deficient woman to menstruate every 28 days because it could be depleting to her. Instead,

one might diagnose “excess water” or “deficient fire” and select herbs which are balancing to the constitution. Similarly, one would not want to stop a woman with excessive fire from menstruating every 24 days. To do so would force her already hot constitution to hold on to more heat and might induce night sweats, pounding headaches, emotional irritability or other heat symptoms.

When menstrual cycles are pathologically frequent or the bleeding excessively heavy leading to anemia and exhaustion, energetically there are two possible causes. One, estrogen/ yang may be excessive, causing excessive buildup of the uterine lining; or two, estrogen may be more or less normal, but progesterone/ yin is deficient and the body is unable to hold on to the normal sulfur energies and they are released too soon. Other bodily and psychological symptoms, as further explained below, can be clues to specifically which is the case. In my own experience, I find a careful pondering of a woman’s physical and psychological symptoms to be far more useful than running lab tests to assess estrogen and progesterone levels. There are such wide normal ranges of these hormones that a number on a piece of paper has proven less helpful to me than a thoughtful consideration of the whole constitution.

Constitutional Assessment

In addition to noting the length of the menstrual cycle and the quantity and duration of the menstrual flow, other hormonal symptoms can be representative of a woman’s constitution. Earth, Air, Fire and Water may be expressed in characteristic ways in the monthly rhythm when excessive.



Figure 1 (Illustrated by Dr. Jillian Stansbury)



Figure 2 (Illustrated by Dr. Jillian Stansbury)

The Salt Propensity

Women with an excessive salt principle will have more inward and persistent symptoms. There tends to be much fluid retention, or chronic cold, damp, stagnant symptoms such as breast cysts, pelvic stagnation, hemorrhoids and constipation. Instead of sudden volatile emotional outbursts, there is more likely to be weeks of fatigue, inwardness, apathy or depression. A woman with such a constitution will often feel best premenstrually or even during the menses as the yang energy is highest during these weeks and helps to balance the yin.

Earth

Typical Earth symptoms are those of stuckness and heaviness. Constipation, lethargy and fatigue are earthy symptoms, as are hard dense pathologies such as varicosities, uterine fibroids and calcifications. Mental emotional patterns that typify excessive earthiness are the tendency to be withdrawn, taciturn, apathetic, stubborn, picky and unreasonably attached to routines or ideas. These women may benefit from warming, moving, fiery and airy herbs (*Phytolacca, Angelica, Crataegus, Taraxicum*).

Water

Typical Water symptoms are those of dampness and susceptibility to external influences. Physical symptoms are fluid accumulation, breast tenderness, bloating and full, aching headaches due to fluid retention. Unlike the volatile outbursts of the sulfuric constitutions, watery emotional disturbances are inward, such as a private sadness over the state of the world, a heightened pathos for the pain of others. Watery emotional symptoms are rarely ego-based, but rather excessive sensitivity regarding the plight of children, the poor or the environment. These emotions can be crippling but they are not expressed outwardly. It would be more typical to become tearful in private and withdraw from others. These women may benefit from warming, drying herbs (*Ceanothus, Zingiber, Salvia and Thymus*).

The Sulfur Propensity

Women with an excessive sulfur principle will have more emotional and transient surface symptoms. There tends to be more anger and irritability released in volatile ways premenstrually. There may be on and off bouts of anxiety or sudden onset of heart palpitations. There may be insomnia and restless sleep, muscle cramps and diarrhea. A woman with such a constitution will often feel best after her menses and through mid-cycle, after the excess yang has been released and before it builds back up again.

Fire

Typical fire symptoms are passionate, sudden, volatile and transient. Sudden sweating, cramps, restlessness and diarrhea are typical fiery symptoms. Prior to menses the libido and passions may run very high. Women may feel moved to exercise and work hard, dance, create and be very social premenstrually. The menses itself may be quite heavy and yet not particularly fatiguing. Emotional outbursts tend to be ego-based, such as lashing out at others for their shortcomings. Anger, irritation and a need to release pent-up feelings are typical, but the manner in which such thoughts are released can often feel burning and stinging to the recipient. Herbs that are moistening and grounding may be balancing here (*Glycyrrhiza, Scutellaria, Matricaria*).

Air

Typical airy symptoms are, like Fire, transient and mutable. But while fiery restlessness is passion and ego-based, airy symptoms are mental and intellectual-based. There may be a desire to clean and organize one's surroundings, or a frenzy and even mania to accomplish a lofty to-do list of goals. There may be a restless sense of dissatisfaction at the imperfections in one's surroundings or lack of order and aesthetics. There may be a desire to create beauty and vivid, visual dreams. There may be neediness and clinginess towards others, or a nagging of family members for support in completion of the tasks that feel so urgent. Herbs that are grounding and warming may be helpful here (*Curcuma, Mahonia, Withania*).

Practical Applications

Heavy Menses, Anger and Irritability:

As explained, excessive bleeding is a symptom of excess Fire and excess yang and energy in general. Anger is sometimes said to be a liver symptom and treating the liver, in fact, often improves both hormone excess by helping the liver to clear estrogen from the blood, and anger and irritability. Many bitter roots, the so-called alterative herbs are said to clear damp heat in traditional Chinese medicine, and modern research has shown such herbs to improve liver function, bile flow and the processing of fats and fat soluble substances such as hormones. Thus, for heat symptoms of menorrhagia and irritability, *Taraxicum Arctium*, *Mahonia* roots and *Achillea* flowers would be helpful in most cases. These plants display the "signature" of Earth and help to anchor down and cool the volatile energy of excess fire.

Vascular Congestion

Hemorrhoids and heavy aching pain in the low back or legs with menses are symptoms of blood congestion. This pathology is somewhat salt-like in that there is a solidity and stuckness of fluid. Herbs that have sulfuric qualities serving to move fluid are indicated here. *Angelica* has had much research showing it to have numerous positive effects on blood vessels and on the blood cells themselves; for example, a reduction in platelet aggregation allowing blood to flow more readily. In traditional Chinese medicine, *Angelica* is said to be a blood mover. *Angelica* is a plant in the *Umbel* family, typified by long hollow tubes – a signature of motion, moving fluid and air. The *Umbel* family is noted to relax the blood vessels, the bronchial passages and the ureters – all serving to move gas and fluid. Hence, pelvic stagnation and vascular stasis might be treated with *Angelica* to move congested fluid about the entire body.

Infertility

As fertility is an inward, yin phenomena, chronic miscarriage and anovulation can be seen as yin deficiency and plants that are yin tonics are useful here. Blood is said to be the most yin fluid (and semen is the most yang fluid) and plants that are fertility tonics tend to have a moist, sticky quality. Sticky fruits and vegetables such as *Longon* and *Lycium* berries and slimy *Asparagus* shoots are said to be blood and yin tonics in traditional Chinese medicine. Nourishing moist roots such as *Licorice*, *Polygonatum*, *Rheumana*, and the blood movers *Angelica* and *Trifolium* are also tonifying to yin.

Hormonally Induced Mental/Emotional Disturbance

As described above, premenstrual emotional disturbances can have numerous causes and qualities. An approach that lumps them all together as “PMS” and simply gives calming herbs will be less effective than an approach that carefully considers the quality of the emotional disturbance within the context of the totality of all the physical and constitutional symptoms.

The Hot Head

Anger and volatility of emotions, as discussed above are both Fire and liver symptoms. If a clinician can find evidence of other symptoms requiring liver support such as poor digestion, acne, constipation, high cholesterol, or a heavy load on the liver, then simply giving liver support may improve the bilious emotional symptoms. Herbs such as *Silybum*, *Mahonia*, and *Taraxicum* are indicated here. If, on the other hand, there are no such liver symptoms, but evidence of excess heat or fire in general, cooling and moisten-

ing herbs may be better. Fire symptoms such as a full-bounding pulse, excessive sweating and pink, flushed face may be better treated with cooling herbs such as *Salvia*, *Matricaria Chamomile* and *Scutellaria*.

The Air Head

If the emotional disturbance presents as a mania, a frenzy to accomplish self-imposed goals, the clinician might attempt to ground the volatile outward energy. If someone has their “head in the clouds” or doesn’t have their “feet on the ground,” they might be said to be ungrounded and manifesting Air symptoms. If someone is stressing out over the goal of redecorating the living room by Saturday, but has forgotten to eat, or exercise or get enough sleep, a clinician might offer anchoring, grounding practices such as meditation, getting eight hours of sleep or sitting down with a pot of tea – regardless of what herbs are in the tea. Herbs which are grounding and calming would include *Valeriana*, *Avena* and *Scutellaria*.

The Stick in the Mud

An apathetic sort of depression, especially when associated with lethargy and fatigue, are typical of Earth excess. A clinician might attempt to “lighten” the person up with moving, heating, fiery or airy herbs, especially if there are other signs of excess earth such as obesity or muscular stiffness. *Cimicifuga* is indicated for a melancholic sort of depression especially when associated with muscle stiffness. *Melissa*, sometimes called the “gladdening herb” is a highly lemony, volatile oil herb that is uplifting and thought to affect both the mood and the hormones via the limbic system, high up in brain. *Verbena* species are another mood “elevating” plant option for excessive earth and associated depression.



The Cry Baby

Tearfulness and oversensitivity typify excess Water. Especially when combined with the physical symptoms of breast cysts and dampness in the mucous membranes, a clinician might offer drying and warming herbs such as *Phytolacca*, *Hydrastis*, *Pulsatilla* and *Hypericum*. Moving stuck fluid with *Phytolacca* will improve most cases of chronic breast cysts, especially when combined with *Ceanothus*. *Hydrastis* and *Mahonia* are excellent astringent, antimicrobial herbs for cases of vaginitis or discharges from mucous membranes. *Hypericum*, with its hot, red color and its affinity for the nerves, is an excellent choice for an over-sensitive sort of PMS mental/emotional disturbance. In ancient times, *Hypericum* was thought to protect from ghosts or external evil influences, as well as protect a home from lightning. As such, *Hypericum* seems to help a “psychic sponge” sort of person protect themselves from external energies.

Cycle Awareness

Some of the pathologies discussed, uterine fibroids, breast cysts, hemorrhagic menses with anemia, or infertility, most certainly require medical treatment. However, many less urgent symptoms and menstrual cycle complaints can be improved simply by keen bodily awareness and appropriate lifestyle changes. It is extremely valuable for women to keep a cycle diary for at least six months noting mental/emotional tendencies and patterns, libido and energy, physical symptoms such as skin eruptions, bowel changes, muscle pain, headache and quality of sleep.

For example, if an Earth dominant woman tends to become withdrawn and depressed, she might be coached to make an extra effort to get out and exer-

cise, or make it a point to get out of the house and socialize in accordance with the patterns that a diary or self-awareness dictates.

An Air dominant woman might be coached to do the opposite. She should guard against taking on too much and try to catch herself when tempted to take on a large project premenstrually. Instead, she should learn to engage in restful grounding activities such as meditation. For those in whom the need to accomplish is extremely strong, they might be encouraged to knit or sew or read or write or any other activity that is rather relaxing and sedentary, yet engages the mind and fulfills the need to create and/or do.

Similarly, the fiery woman might be encouraged to avoid large social settings where possible until she can learn to police her temper. Grounding activities such as gardening can be highly therapeutic, as can walking in the forest, swimming, soaking in the bath – all earthy and watery activities to cool and ground her.

And a woman who is phlegmatic (watery) might be encouraged to avoid reading the newspaper or TV if she becomes easily troubled, and watch comedies, not dramas with violence and tragedy. She should avoid eating dampening foods such as dairy products and oils, and she should exercise to release the excess Water as perspiration and dry her a bit.

Women and their partners who take care to know themselves and their rhythms are enabled to work with the currents, rather than be tossed about by them. Simple self-awareness of one’s constitution and one’s tendencies is medicine itself. Clinicians who take the time to understand their patients’ constitutions and patterns are better enabled to offer real help and formulate sophisticated prescriptions, herbal or otherwise.

