



WomenWise is a health service that assesses the impact of hormones and lifestyle choices on midlife wellbeing. Lifestyle Editor Camilla Cary-Elwes finds out more.

Insomnia, aches and pains, a heavy 20-day menstrual cycle, mood swings and loss of libido... At 47, I've been ticking the symptoms off my midlife bingo card for the past few years. Some ailments come and go, such as irrational rage, creeping dread and sore boobs, but others, like sleepless nights, have become a constant presence.

When symptoms came to a head last year (hello, heart flutters), I finally went to the doctor. Though I wasn't sure I ticked all the boxes, I was hopeful a prescription for HRT would set me on the right path.

Sadly, that wasn't the case. Within a fortnight, my brain was so foggy it became almost impossible to function. I went up a bra size and felt constantly ravenous. My waistbands became tighter and my regular runs like wading through treacle.

After persevering for five months, hoping things would settle down, I eventually decided to stop. Within days, my thinking became clearer, my hunger subsided and I soon fit back into my old bras (getting back into my favourite jeans was, maddeningly, a completely different matter). I felt more like myself again. It was a positive change, but my previous symptoms were still lingering, leaving me unsure of what steps to take next.

Coming across WomenWise, therefore, seemed serendipitous - a comprehensive midlife hormonal health check that could locate where I was in my perimenopausal journey, something my overworked GP simply didn't have the time or resources to do. By looking at biochemistry, genetics, symptoms and lifestyle, WomenWise can identify what's contributing to how you are feeling. Sex hormones are a key part, but other pieces of the puzzle include insulin sensitivity, thyroid hormones, iron levels, adrenal function, histamine tolerance and diet.

Sarah Williamson, founder of WomenWise, explains: 'The latest figures are that only 26% of perimenopausal/menopausal women take HRT. According to a survey conducted by the

'There are two amazing mimics of menopause, which are thyroid problems and low iron'

Balance menopause app, 88% of these women benefit from HRT, but just 46% experience a significant improvement in symptoms. So that leaves many women needing to pull other levers to feel good. That's really who we're speaking to at WomenWise. HRT is a tool and an option for many women, but there are two amazing mimics of menopause, which are thyroid problems and low iron. These lead to brain fog, deep fatigue, hair loss, not sleeping properly and restless legs - all the things that people can mistake for menopause symptoms. Then we have other things going on, like insulin resistance, that leads to fatigue. If it's only low hormone levels, that's when HRT works very well. But if it's hormone level and everything else, it doesn't resolve those other issues.'

All the kit

Once signed up, a shoebox-sized kit arrived from WomenWise, containing everything needed to extract blood, urine and cell samples. The two blood tests measure thyroid function, key nutrient status, underlying inflammation and HBA1C levels (indication of blood glucose over the past three months). The four urine samples, meanwhile, assess adrenal function over two days. There's also a DNA sample taken from cheek cells for an insight into the genetic predisposition to process and clear estrogen, genes that impact brain chemistry, and how well alcohol and caffeine are metabolised. It was all fairly straightforward to do - and avoiding coffee for 36 hours for the urine ►

test was by far the hardest part. Once extracted, the samples are sent to labs through the post or via a pre-arranged courier.

Alongside the physical tests are blood pressure readings (a blood pressure monitor machine is helpfully supplied in the box). Plus, importantly, there is a detailed questionnaire covering health history, symptoms and lifestyle, which takes around 20 minutes to complete.

Results are in...

Once the lab results are processed, they are cross-referenced against the questionnaire answers by a nutritional therapist and reviewed by a GP, then put into a comprehensive, bespoke health report.

My report made for fascinating reading. The good news was I had no autoimmune or histamine problems. Ditto for the mood and motivation section, with normal levels of serotonin, dopamine and adrenaline. My ability to process alcohol is also apparently excellent (not necessarily a good thing!).

While WomenWise can't pinpoint exactly where you are on the menopause arc, it can indicate whether you are low estrogen, low progesterone or fluctuating. This is gleaned from the symptom questionnaire rather than from the samples, which can be inaccurate due to hormonal changes over the month. Mine indicated I was low on progesterone and testosterone levels, but estrogen levels were still fluctuating and often high, which may explain why I'd struggled to add HRT into the mix.

As with many others that take the WomenWise test, my biggest deficiency was low iron, due to a compressed menstrual cycle and an aversion to red meat. As Sarah points out: 'Many of our women are phenomenally low in iron. With heavy bleeds over a few years, women don't notice their iron levels going down. If the ferritin range goes from 13 to 150 nanograms per millilitres of blood, it means one woman can have ten times as much as another but they're both within the normal range. Low iron can affect metabolic rate and function, so we encourage people to reach optimal levels, not just within the range.'



The report also showed signs of insulin resistance, a sluggish and dysregulated cortisol pattern and subclinical low thyroid function. This is another common finding for Sarah: 'We see a lot of insulin resistance, particularly for women struggling with weight, and a lot of dysregulated cortisol patterns. Some women have been through a lot over the last few years and they are quite burnt out, so we need to work to get the brain listening again.'

Action plan

Alongside the health breakdown is an action plan, with diet, exercise and supplement recommendations. The nutritional suggestions were all things I knew but gave me a little nudge towards actually following. First, was to massively increase protein intake to 2.2g per kg of ideal body weight. Other advice was to opt for healthy

'One woman can have ten times as much iron as another but they're both within the normal range'

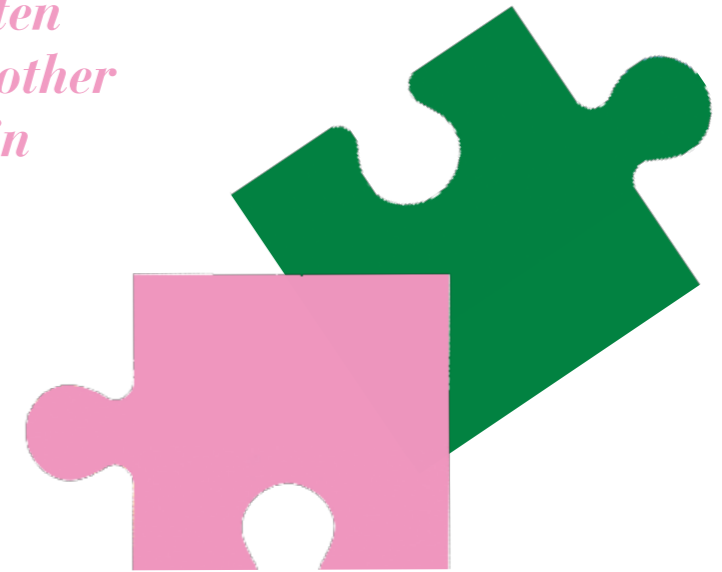
fats, but avoid glucose-rich carbohydrates and appetite disruptors (i.e. foods rich in carbs and fat, flavour enhancers and artificial sweeteners etc). I am a mainly healthy eater but have a very sweet tooth and find sugary snacks irresistible when low on fuel or stressed.

Sarah explains: 'Some women really struggle with cravings and find themselves at the biscuit cupboard the whole time. It's almost like an obsessive filling of food. Some women drink a lot more in midlife for the same reason. What they're doing is self-medicating their brain chemistry, as carbohydrates and alcohol target GABA receptors. And they boost serotonin by pushing their blood sugar high and getting tryptophan into the brain. They're basically just hacking their biochemistry. But there is a better way.'

Making changes

My bathroom cabinet rattles with supplements but I have so far been pretty faddy about what I take - it's usually something I've read about, or spotted on special offer. It was helpful, therefore, to have tailored recommendations.

On waking, N-acetyl cysteine (NAC) was recommended to support glutathione, a powerful antioxidant that may help protect the body from disease and improve insulin sensitivity. With breakfast, myo-inositol to support insulin sensitivity; resveratrol for estrogen detox; iron to boost those ferritin levels; maca root to support sex hormones and sex drive; and vitamin C to support progesterone. At night time, magnesium and glycine were suggested to support GABA receptor activity and calm the mind and muscles.



Exercise-wise, the report suggests building stress-resilience, lifting weights and stretching, cold exposure, breathwork and vagus nerve exercises. I already do a lot of walking, running and horse-riding but am now trying to incorporate weights as well. Cold water exposure is very much a work in progress, however.

So, the golden question: has it worked? In short, yes. I think it has. The biggest game-changer has been increased protein - I'm yet to manage 130g a day, but now make an effort to exceed 60g. A good iron supplement has also made a world of difference. Magnesium has always been a staple but adding glycine in the evening does seem to aid sleep and makes wrangling children into bed less stress-inducing.

In order to stay on track, WomenWise offers 12 months of support, with an online tracker to map symptom changes, and show where improvements or course correction may be needed. There are also regular emails with useful tips on everything from optimising nutrition to supporting sleep.

All in all, it's been an invaluable way to understand my midlife body and give it the second-half support it needs. 🍷

Packages from £399, [womenwise.health](https://www.womenwise.health)