hormones to rise. Naturally. Now that’s something to be thankful for!

**RELAX WEEK 1**

If you’re like many people, you’ve got a demanding job, a family who needs you, and a never-ending to-do list. No wonder you feel tired or depressed, anxious or irritable. Or perhaps you can’t sleep (although you have no problem eating). Sex—or at least good sex—is a distant memory.

All these are hallmark symptoms of chronic stress. Stress activates the fight-or-flight response, the body’s involuntary response to a threat that makes our hearts pound and our breath shorten. Chief among the hormones released during this response is the stress hormone cortisol. Cortisol automatically kicks up your appetite, prompting you not only to want to eat huge quantities but especially to want sweets and simple carbohydrates. These are foods that make insulin levels spike and then plummet, which may leave you feeling hungrier than ever and eating again, says *Prevention* advisor Pamela M. Peeke, MD, MPH, assistant clinical professor of medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine in Baltimore and author of *Fight Fat After Forty* (Viking Press, 2000).

“Stress fat” is also concentrated in the last place in your body you need it: deep in your tummy. To help reset your internal stress-o-meter to normal levels, and perhaps reduce stress-related hormonal cravings, experts recommend the following strategies:

**Put magic photos in your “stress zones.”** Clip to your visor a photo from your anniversary trip to Hawaii to calm you when you’re stuck in traffic. Place in your work area beautifully framed pictures of your children.

**Talk some “calming sense” into yourself.** Try silently repeating a soothing word or phrase to yourself, such as “peace,” while taking slow, deep breaths through your nose.

**Schedule regular play periods** into your appointment book. Whether it’s piecing together a 1,000-piece puzzle or going sledding with your kids, play of any kind distracts us from our worries, providing us with a temporary refuge from everyday stress.
avoid alcohol, which is sedating but disrupts sleep.

Make your bedroom dark. Darkness stimulates the production of melatonin, a light-sensitive hormone produced by the pineal gland, which is located in the brain. Some evidence suggests that supplementing with this hormone can help remedy insomnia. (Take only temporarily under the supervision of a knowledgeable medical doctor. See "Supplement News" on p. 58 for more information.) To manipulate this hormone naturally, invest in thick, heavy curtains, or don an eye mask.

A healthy diet can have a dramatically positive effect on hormone levels. The basic plan? A diet that’s loaded with whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, and low-fat or fat-free dairy products, and that contains less red meat and processed foods.

For one thing, a high-fiber diet can help keep your blood sugar levels stable. Otherwise, foods made with refined grains, such as white bread, white pasta, and white rice, are digested quickly and speeded into the bloodstream as the body’s primary source of fuel: blood sugar. This rapid breakdown triggers a flood of insulin, the hormone that ferries the sugar into the cells. Shortly thereafter, blood sugar levels drop precipitously, which signals the adrenal glands to release more cortisol. By contrast, beans, brown rice, and whole grain cereals take much longer to digest. Thus, insulin levels rise gradually, blood sugar levels remain steady, and cortisol levels don’t skyrocket.

Here are some other diet tips to help trick your weight control hormones with food:

Have “minimeals.” Instead of eating three big meals a day—plus random snacks—eat five or six smaller meals spaced evenly throughout the day. Keep each meal between 250 and 350 calories. “By eating smaller yet more frequent meals, with correct
Prevent the PMS Munchies

If out-of-control cravings drive you to the cookie jar every month, here’s what you can do to avoid packing on extra pounds over the long haul:

First, realize that it’s normal to experience food cravings around the time of your period, says Prevention advisor Pamela M. Peeke, MD, MPH. The menstrual cycle delivers a double whammy of two different hormone groups increasing at the same time: sex hormones (estrogen and progesterone) and stress hormones (cortisol and epinephrine). Some say that the neurotransmitter serotonin also fluctuates with your monthly cycle. These changes drive up your appetite and prompt you to eat the kind of foods that increase your insulin levels.

To minimize the munchies, here’s what Dr. Peeke recommends:

- **Eat a little more protein**, such as an egg or a cup of beans, at every meal when you have PMS to help prevent wild cravings. “Protein can give you an exquisite sense of satisfaction,” says Dr. Peeke.
- **Get your calcium** (the recommended Daily Value of 1,000 mg a day from food and supplements). Research shows that it works to reduce PMS cravings.
- **Exercise**, no matter how bad you feel. The aerobic charge will dampen your appetite.

proportions of proteins, fats, and carbohydrates, you may be manipulating your hormones in favor of reaching the weight you want,” says Geoffrey Redmond, MD, director of the Hormone Center of New York in New York City and author of The Good News about Women's Hormones (Warner Books, Inc., 1995).

Here are theories about why mini-meals work:

- Spreading small calorie loads throughout the course of a day may trigger growth hormone, which helps keep your body’s metabolism efficient—and burning calories.
- The closer that one small meal is to the next, the less your glucose levels will soar, which means lower insulin on a regular basis.

**Make breakfast a must.** It is the “single greatest factor in maintaining portion control and stable hormone levels throughout the day,” says Dr. Redmond.

**Begin with a protein appetizer** 10 minutes before each meal. It’s possible that doing this sends your body the right signals not to overeat, since protein stimulates the production of the appetite-regulating hormones cholecystokinin and glucagon. Have string cheese or a very small handful of nuts before you sit down to dine.

**Forget fat-free foods.** Compare labels of fat-free treats with their full-fat
Turn On Your **Weight Loss** Hormones!

muscles on a regular basis, the more efficiently you’ll use insulin and burn carbohydrates and body fat.”

There’s strong evidence that moderate exercise—a brisk walk, a 45-minute “date” with the Nautilus machines—also triggers the release of “pleasure chemicals” known as endorphins. Finally, working up a good sweat activates the “feel-good” neurotransmitters dopamine and serotonin, which reduce the symptoms of depression.

Your basic exercise plan is as follows:

**Get your heart pumping.** *Prevention* recommends 30 minutes of moderate activity, such as brisk walking or bicycling, at least five times a week for fitness. Or 45 to 60 minutes of moderate activity at least five times a week for weight loss. Before starting any exercise program, talk with your doctor.

**Lift weights.** Muscles are your calorie-burning furnace, so the better you maintain them, the higher you keep your metabolic rate. “Weight training is essential for women over 40 to help compensate for the decreased muscle mass from falling hormones,” explains Dr. Peeke.

versions, and you’re likely to find that, in many cases, the calories of fat-free foods are as high or actually higher. That’s because sugar and other quickly digested simple carbohydrates are used to make up for the fat-based ingredients. Getting your blood sugar off track can boomerang by making you hungrier in a little while.

**MOVE THAT BODY**

**WEEK 4**

Lacing up your sneakers is virtually a call to action for the hormones that reverse fat storage and curb eating. “Your muscles are loaded with insulin receptors,” says Christiane Northrup, MD, author of *Women’s Bodies, Women’s Wisdom* (Bantam Books, 1998) and *The Wisdom of Menopause* (Bantam Books, 2001). “The more muscle mass you have and the more heat you generate from your

For links to everything mentioned here, go to www.prevention.com/web.