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Comprehensive Overview of Elevated Testosterone Levels in Women

Farida Bouattoura

Founder and Director, Advocating for Democratic Values and Need of Civil Engagement, New York, NY, United States

ABSTRACT

This comprehensive overview examines the causes, impacts, and broader implications of elevated testosterone levels in women, emphasizing conditions such as Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH), ovarian or adrenal tumors, and hyperthecosis. Elevated testosterone can lead to significant health challenges including reproductive issues, physical symptoms like hirsutism and acne, and psychological effects. The role of testosterone in female physiology, particularly in reproductive health, bone density, muscle mass, and mood, is explored. The article also delves into the relationship between testosterone and dominance behaviors, the impact on female athletes, and the interplay between cortisol and testosterone levels. Racial, ethnic, and dietary factors influencing testosterone levels are analyzed, highlighting the unique challenges faced by African women and professional fighters. Effective management strategies, including medical interventions, dietary adjustments, and lifestyle modifications, are discussed. The article underscores the importance of comprehensive education and tailored treatment approaches to address elevated testosterone levels, promoting overall health and well-being for affected women.

Keywords:Cortisol-Testosterone Relationship, Dietary Influences on Testosterone, Elevated Testosterone in Women, Female Athletes and Hormones, Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), Racial and Ethnic Differences

INTRODUCTION

Testosterone is a critical hormone that plays a significant role in both male and female physiology. While often associated with male traits and reproductive functions, testosterone is also crucial for women's health, influencing a range of physiological processes including reproductive health, bone density, muscle mass, and mood. Elevated testosterone levels in women, however, can lead to a host of medical conditions and challenges. This comprehensive overview examines the causes, impacts, and broader implications of elevated testosterone levels in women, with a particular focus on female athletes, racial and ethnic differences, and dietary influences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Conditions Leading to Elevated Testosterone Levels in Women

One of the most common conditions associated with elevated testosterone in women is Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS). PCOS is an endocrine disorder that affects women of reproductive age and is characterized by hyperandrogenism, ovulatory dysfunction, and polycystic ovaries. According to Azziz, Carmina, and Dewailly (2016), the primary causes of PCOS include genetic predisposition, insulin resistance, and hormonal imbalances. Symptoms of PCOS are diverse and include irregular menstrual cycles, hirsutism, acne, obesity, and infertility, affecting approximately 6-12% of women of reproductive age (Azziz et al., 2016).

Another significant condition is Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH), an inherited disorder affecting adrenal gland function and leading to excessive androgen production. CAH is most commonly caused by mutations in genes responsible for cortisol production, with 21-hydroxylase deficiency being the most prevalent form. Merke and Bornstein (2005) describe CAH symptoms as including ambiguous genitalia in newborns, early-onset puberty, severe acne, and infertility. This condition is relatively rare, affecting about 1 in 15,000 live births (Merke & Bornstein, 2005). Ovarian or adrenal tumors can also lead to elevated testosterone levels. These androgen-secreting tumors can cause rapid development of masculine features such as deepening of the voice, irregular menstrual cycles, and hirsutism. Although these tumors are less common, their impact on hormone levels is significant, necessitating medical intervention (Nieman, 2019).

Hyperthecosis, a condition wherein ovarian stromal cells produce an excessive amount of testosterone, often presents as a severe form of PCOS. Goodman (2015) notes that symptoms of hyperthecosis include severe hirsutism, virilization, and metabolic disturbances, recognizing this condition in severe cases of PCOS. Pregnancy and postpartum changes can temporarily alter testosterone levels due to hormonal fluctuations. These physiological changes can result in changes in libido, energy levels, mood swings, and temporary hirsutism, which typically resolve postpartum (Soldin, 2017). Menopause, and particularly early menopause, is another phase where testosterone levels can be affected. Menopause typically occurs around age 50, but early menopause, which can be prompted by natural aging, medical treatments like chemotherapy, or surgical removal of ovaries, occurs before age 40. Symptoms include weight gain, mood swings, hot flashes, and increased testosterone relative to declining estrogen levels. Early menopause affects about 1% of women under 40 (Nelson, 2009).

Conditions such as insulin resistance and metabolic syndrome, often linked with obesity and type 2 diabetes, also influence testosterone levels. Genetic predisposition, poor diet, and lack of exercise are contributing factors. Alberti, Zimmet, and Shaw (2009) indicate that metabolic syndrome, characterized by weight gain (particularly abdominal), high blood sugar levels, and potentially increased androgen levels, affects about one-third of adults in the US.

Cushing's Syndrome, caused by prolonged exposure to high levels of cortisol, can indirectly cause elevated testosterone. Overuse of corticosteroid medication or overproduction of cortisol by the adrenal glands leads to this condition, with symptoms including weight gain, especially around the midsection and upper back, facial puffiness, and thinning skin. Cushing's Syndrome affects about 10-15 people per million each year (Nieman, 2008). Elevated cortisol levels can also result from intense physical activities or controlled trauma, such as fighting or extreme training, which put significant stress on the body (Sapolsky, 2004). Idiopathic Hirsutism refers to excessive hair growth in women without an identifiable hormonal imbalance or underlying condition. Escobar-Morreale (2010) suggests that the exact cause is unknown, but it may involve slight increases in androgen sensitivity, with symptoms including increased hair growth on the face, chest, and back. Idiopathic Hirsutism accounts for a significant portion of hirsutism cases in women.

B. Commonalities Among Conditions

Despite the diverse causes of elevated testosterone levels, several common features emerge across these conditions. Hormonal imbalances are a consistent factor, with elevated testosterone being a primary concern. Reproductive impacts are also prevalent, with many conditions affecting menstrual cycles and fertility. Physical symptoms such as hirsutism, acne, weight changes, and sometimes virilization are common, as are psychological effects like mood swings, anxiety, and depression due to hormonal fluctuations.

C. Function of Testosterone in Women

Testosterone plays several critical roles in women's health. It supports ovarian function and sexual arousal, contributing to reproductive health (Fritz &Speroff, 2011). Testosterone also helps maintain bone strength, reducing the risk of osteoporosis (Nelson, 2009). In terms of muscle mass, testosterone contributes to muscle growth and maintenance, which is particularly relevant for female athletes (Goodman, 2015). Furthermore, testosterone influences mood stability and energy levels, affecting overall well-being (Soldin, 2017).

D. Elevated Testosterone and Dominance in Women

Research into the relationship between testosterone and dominance behaviors in women has been extensive. Studies have shown that elevated testosterone levels are associated with increased assertiveness, competitive behavior, and leadership qualities. For example, Welling, Jones, and Puts (2008) found that higher testosterone levels correlate with more dominant and assertive behaviors. These traits, while beneficial in many contexts, can lead to social and professional challenges due to societal gender norms. Cashdan (1995) highlights that women displaying high dominance behaviors often face social resistance, which can affect their professional and personal lives.

E. Case Studies and Examples

In exploring elevated testosterone levels among African women, it is crucial to consider both biological and sociocultural factors. Escasa, Casey, and Gray (2011) found that women from more competitive and physically demanding environments, such as certain African tribes, exhibit higher baseline testosterone levels. These elevated levels are linked to their roles within their communities, which often involve significant physical labor and leadership responsibilities. This context suggests that environmental and lifestyle factors play a significant role in determining testosterone levels.

A study by Dabbs and Hargrove (1997) on testosterone, social class, and aggressive behavior in women provides further insight. This research, involving 84 female prisoners, showed a significant correlation between higher testosterone levels and increased dominance and assertiveness. The study underscores the link between elevated testosterone and dominance behaviors, suggesting that higher testosterone levels may be a response to or a result of engaging in competitive or high-stress environments.

F. Impact on Female Athletes

Elevated testosterone levels are notably common among female athletes due to intense training and physical activity. Higher testosterone can enhance performance by increasing muscle mass, strength, and recovery rates. However, it may also predispose athletes to conditions such as PCOS and hyperandrogenism. Handelsman, Hirschberg, and Bermon (2018) emphasize the complexity of the relationship between physical training, controlled trauma, and hormonal changes in female athletes, noting that careful monitoring is essential to prevent adverse health effects.

G. Elevated Cortisol Levels in Professional Fighters

Professional fighters, including boxers and karate practitioners, often experience elevated cortisol levels. Cortisol, known as the "stress hormone," can affect testosterone levels, which are critical for muscle growth, recovery, and overall performance. The causes of elevated cortisol in professional fighters include both physical and psychological stress. Intense physical training and competition significantly elevate cortisol levels. A study on mixed martial arts (MMA) athletes found that intensive training camps can lead to increased cortisol levels, indicative of the body's response to physical stress and exertion (St Mary's University, 2024).

Psychological stress also contributes to elevated cortisol levels. The psychological demands of preparing for and competing in fights, including pre-competition anxiety and the mental focus required for strategic planning, can lead to significant psychological stress. Ferrand et al. (2001) found that pre-competition anxiety in judo athletes was associated with elevated cortisol levels, reflecting the psychological stress experienced by athletes in high-pressure situations.

H. Interlink Between Cortisol and Testosterone

Evidence suggests that cortisol and testosterone levels are inversely related. Elevated cortisol can suppress testosterone production, affecting muscle growth, recovery, and overall performance in athletes. Crewther et al. (2014) highlight that while acute increases in cortisol during intense training can be accompanied by temporary increases in testosterone levels as part of the body's adaptive response, chronic elevation of cortisol is detrimental. Physiologically, testosterone is an anabolic hormone essential for muscle repair and growth, whereas cortisol is catabolic, involved in breaking down tissues. When cortisol levels are elevated for extended periods, the body prioritizes energy breakdown over muscle synthesis, negatively impacting muscle mass and strength.

I. Effects of Elevated Cortisol

Elevated cortisol levels can have several adverse effects on professional fighters. Chronic elevation of cortisol can lead to muscle catabolism, detrimental to fighters who rely on muscle strength and power. High cortisol levels can also suppress immune function, making fighters more susceptible to infections and slower recovery from injuries. Persistent high cortisol can lead to chronic fatigue, reduced performance, and burnout. Additionally, elevated cortisol can affect mood and mental health, potentially leading to issues such as anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances (Kraemer &Ratamess, 2005).

J. Managing Cortisol Levels

Maintaining optimal cortisol levels is crucial for the health and performance of professional fighters. Proper rest and recovery between training sessions and competitions are essential for managing cortisol levels. Balanced nutrition, including a diet rich in essential nutrients, supports overall health and helps manage cortisol levels. Stress management techniques, such as meditation, yoga, or deep-breathing exercises, can help manage psychological stress. Working with sports psychologists, nutritionists, and physiotherapists provides a holistic approach to managing both physical and mental stress.

K. Racial and Ethnic Differences

Research indicates that hormonal disorders, including those leading to elevated testosterone, vary by race and ethnicity. For instance, African American women are more likely to experience conditions such as metabolic syndrome, which can affect testosterone levels. Cardel, Higgins, Willig, Keita, and Allison (2013) highlight that socioeconomic factors, access to healthcare, and genetic predispositions all play roles in the prevalence and management of these conditions among different racial groups.

L. Diet and Testosterone Levels

Diet plays a crucial role in managing testosterone levels. Certain foods can either increase or decrease hormone production, and understanding these dietary influences can help regulate testosterone levels. Consuming healthy fats, such as those found in avocados, olive oil, nuts, and seeds, may support testosterone production (Volek et al., 1997). Foods high in zinc, such as oysters, red meat, and spinach, are also known to boost testosterone levels (Prasad, 2013). Vitamin D, which has been linked to testosterone production, can be sourced from fatty fish, fortified milk, and eggs (Pilz et al., 2011). Lean meats, legumes, and dairy products provide essential nutrients that support overall hormonal health (Layman, 2009).

Conversely, excessive sugar intake can lead to insulin resistance, negatively impacting hormone levels (Lustig, 2013). Processed foods often contain unhealthy fats and additives that can disrupt hormonal balance (Cordain et al., 2005). Excessive alcohol consumption can impair liver function, affecting hormone metabolism (Emanuele & Emanuele, 1998).

M. Managing Elevated Testosterone Levels

Managing elevated testosterone levels involves a multifaceted approach, including medical interventions, dietary adjustments, and lifestyle modifications. Hormone replacement therapy can help balance hormone levels in women experiencing elevated testosterone due to menopause or other conditions (Nelson, 2009). Oral contraceptives are often prescribed to manage symptoms of PCOS and other conditions leading to hyperandrogenism by regulating menstrual cycles and reducing androgen levels (Goodman, 2015). Medications such as spironolactone, which block androgen receptors, can reduce the effects of elevated testosterone (Fritz &Speroff, 2011).

A balanced diet emphasizing whole foods rich in essential nutrients can support hormonal balance. Limiting processed foods and sugars can help reduce insulin resistance and support overall hormonal health (Lustig, 2013). Regular physical activity helps maintain a healthy weight and improve insulin sensitivity, which can lower testosterone levels in women with PCOS and other conditions (Koch, 2014). Stress management practices, such as yoga, meditation, and mindfulness, can reduce stress, positively affecting hormone levels (Chrousos& Gold, 1992). Ensuring adequate and quality sleep is also essential for hormonal balance, as sleep deprivation can disrupt the endocrine system and exacerbate hormonal imbalances (Van Cauter et al., 2008).Routine blood tests to monitor hormone levels are essential for assessing the effectiveness of treatment and making necessary adjustments. Regular follow-up appointments with healthcare providers help track progress, address any emerging issues, and refine treatment plans (Goodman, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Understanding the conditions that lead to elevated testosterone levels in women, their commonalities, and the impact of diet and lifestyle is crucial for effective diagnosis and treatment. The role of diet, particularly the influence of a traditional North African diet, underscores the importance of cultural dietary practices in managing hormone levels. While some components of this diet can support hormonal health, they may also contribute to higher testosterone levels. Comprehensive education and management strategies, including medical interventions, dietary adjustments, and lifestyle modifications, are essential for promoting overall health and well-being. The intersection of elevated testosterone levels, societal norms, and competitive environments, particularly in the context of female athletes, illustrates the complexity of managing this hormone. The standards set by international institutions often reflect structural power dynamics rooted in historical and cultural biases. African women, who may naturally exhibit higher testosterone levels due to genetic and environmental factors, face unique challenges in competitive sports. This reality raises questions about fairness and the inclusivity of global athletic standards. Understanding and addressing these nuances is essential for fostering an equitable and supportive environment for all athletes.

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