

Are Your Adrenals Fatigued?

By Terri Saunders

So many people today have lifestyles that are physically, mentally and emotionally demanding. Incredibly busy schedules, too little sleep, financial worries, overwork, relationship challenges, compromised health and a toxic environment can take their toll on well being. The pace of life has become so stressful, that millions of people across the globe are now experiencing a little known but very common condition called adrenal fatigue. It is estimated that up to 80% of American adults suffer from adrenal fatigue at some time in their lives and many children do too. Yet it is one of the most under-diagnosed health challenges in the world.

The adrenal glands are called the “stress glands” due to the critical role they play in helping the body handle the demands of emotional and physical stress. The two pyramid shaped walnut sized adrenal glands sit on top of the kidneys and secrete over 50 hormones that direct the body’s response to numerous internal and external stimuli. The adrenal medulla portion of the gland secretes adrenaline (epinephrine) and noradrenaline (norepinephrine) in response to crises. When danger is perceived, these hormones stimulate the rate and strength of heart contractions and dilate the bronchi and blood vessels, increasing blood flow to the muscles for the “fight or flight response. The medulla works in tandem with the adrenal cortex which secretes many more hormones including the stimulant/stress hormone cortisol, anti-aging hormone DHEA and the sex and steroid hormones estrogen, testosterone, pregnenolone, progesterone, and aldosterone.

The adrenals significantly influence the function of every organ, tissue and gland in the body and affect the way we think and feel. They play a major role in the utilization and conversion of carbohydrates, fats and proteins into energy. They determine the distribution of fats in the body, particularly around the waist and face. They help to regulate blood sugar, gastrointestinal and cardiovascular function. They protect the body from injury and disease by producing anti-inflammatory and anti-oxidant hormones which help to minimize damage from allergic reactions, alcohol, drugs and environmental toxins. After midlife in both men and women, the adrenals gradually become the primary source of sex hormones, affecting the sex drive in both sexes and easing menopause in women.

We cannot live without our adrenals, and the quality of our life depends on their optimum function. When we are under stress the adrenals must mobilize most of their efforts to modulating the body’s reaction to stress which they are perfectly capable of doing for limited periods of time. However repeated, chronic or long-term stress compromises adrenal function resulting in numerous health problems including chronic fatigue, weak immunity, allergies, slow healing response, decreased stamina and diminished ability to cope with stress.

Diseases in which anti-inflammatory corticosteroid drugs such as prednisone and cortisone are prescribed always have an adrenal component. However, these synthetic cortisols are up to 17 times stronger than natural cortisol, and the body pays a heavy price for the relief they provide. Even after just a few days on these drugs it takes several days to weeks for adrenal function to return to normal. If taken for a longer term it may take up to 2 years for the adrenals to begin producing cortisol on their own again and in some cases they may never recover.

In nature, the adrenals were designed to respond to life-threatening danger such as having to quickly run away from an attacking animal. However, modern man must continually cope with a multitude of stresses that, though not life threatening, are persistent such as paying the bills, coping with traffic, family stress, work deadlines, or a long-term illness such as arthritis, cancer or chronic allergies. Insufficient sleep, poor diet, drugs and toxic pollutants further damage the adrenals. Exhausted and stressed out, many people resort to stimulants such as coffee, alcohol and prescription and recreational drugs to prop themselves up so they can keep going. In cases like this, the adrenals never have time to properly recover and over time they become overly stressed, inefficient, tired and weak resulting in varying degrees of adrenal fatigue or deficiency. This is called hypoadrenia or adrenal burnout. People with adrenal fatigue may appear normal on the surface with no outward signs of disease, yet they are headed for serious health problems unless changes in lifestyle occur.

Hypoadrenia was discovered by Sir Thomas Addison in 1855 and identified it as a significant contributor to disease. However, in the last 50 years the medical establishment has recognized only the rarest most severe forms of adrenal imbalance. Laboratory tests use cortisol levels to determine adrenal function and only the lowest and highest levels are considered markers of adrenal pathology. Addison’s disease is life-threatening hypoadrenia noted by dangerously low levels of cortisol occurring in only 4 out of 100,000 people. Equally rare Cushings syndrome is severe hyperadrenia resulting in pathologically high levels of cortisol. Moderate imbalances in cortisol levels due to varying levels of adrenal dysfunction are not considered significant by the medical establishment and go undiagnosed. Patients are often told that their adrenals are fine and that their complaints are psychosomatic. They may be given antidepressants to “ease” their stress. This actually adds more toxins and stress to the system, further depleting the adrenals.

In his groundbreaking book, “Adrenal Fatigue: The 21st Century Stress Syndrome”, James Wilson, N.D., D.C., PhD, addresses adrenal fatigue as a valid diagnosable syndrome that can be treated and healed. In the last 10 years Dr. Wilson has endeavored to educate physicians and the public about this issue and has helped thousands to achieve wellness. In his book he identifies the symptoms of adrenal fatigue and outlines a program of adrenal recovery that can restore overall health.

Signs of adrenal fatigue vary with the degree of adrenal dysfunction. As the adrenals become more debilitated, symptoms become more severe and may present as diseases that uninformed doctors may never link to the adrenals. Here are some indicators that your adrenals may be working overtime and need a rest: Difficulty getting up in the morning and general lack of energy; increased effort required for routine tasks; salt craving due to a sodium-potassium imbalance; decreased ability to handle minor stress; less tolerance for others; chronic or repeated infections and inflammation, especially respiratory illness; increased time needed to recover from illness or injury; allergies; autoimmune disorders such as rheumatoid arthritis; viral infections including herpes, Epstein Barr, HIV, and hepatitis C; chronic fatigue syndrome; low back pain; fibromyalgia; decreased sex drive and sexual performance;

increased PMS and hot flashes; thyroid imbalance; chronic digestive and circulatory problems; lightheadedness upon standing due to low blood pressure; jitteriness, anxiety, or panic attacks; rapid heartbeat; blood sugar imbalances; mild to moderate depression; unfulfilling work and relationships; over thinking and frequent worry; poor focus and memory; decreased productivity; sleep disturbances; not fully awake until 10 am; low energy between 3 and 4 pm; feel better after 6 pm and after eating dinner; feel worse if skip meals; consuming sweets, coffee and colas to stay awake; split fingernails.

A severe illness, injury, surgery or emotional shock such as the death of a loved one, losing one's job or a disintegrating relationship can instantly put the adrenals in overdrive. Repeated respiratory infections commonly precede adrenal fatigue with each successive infection depleting the adrenals even more. Mercury fillings suppress adrenal hormone output, while dental abscesses, root canals and poor dental work are very hard on the adrenals. Alcoholism and addictions are common in people with adrenal fatigue. Animal studies show that the feeling of helplessness is the most stressful and physically damaging emotion, wreaking havoc on the adrenals.

Children born to mothers with adrenal fatigue have weak adrenals, and vaccines assault the immune system and adrenals. Children with food sensitivities, allergies, asthma, chronic ear infections, ADHD and autism all have adrenal fatigue.

Dr. Wilson points out that presentation of the above symptoms is usually sufficient to diagnose adrenal fatigue. Saliva testing can also be done to determine cortisol levels indicative of adrenal function. The adrenals secrete cortisol according to circadian rhythms determined by the natural cycles of day and night. Cortisol levels naturally rise and awaken us with the morning sun and peak at around 8 am. Cortisol is lowest during the day between 3 and 4 pm, which can cause a drop in blood sugar and low energy. Levels rise in the early evening and fall again as darkness descends signaling the body to sleep at around 9 pm. If we fight this natural tendency and remain awake until 10 pm, the adrenals will assume that some stress or danger requires us to stay alert so they secrete more cortisol to keep us awake. If we stay up past 11 pm we may feel a second wind and stay up even later into the night. This is why establishing a healthy sleep cycle with 8 or more hours of sleep per night is required for adrenal recovery and general health. Our most restorative sleep occurs between 10 pm and midnight. People who wake up during the night, especially from 1 to 3 am, may be experiencing a drop in blood sugar due to weak adrenals and the liver's inability to release stored glucose into the bloodstream due to congestion from toxins and gallstones.

People that work through the night hours have a particularly hard time as this disrupts their internal circadian clock and adversely affects the entire endocrine system. Those that switch from day to night shifts with less than 3 weeks between changes are extremely challenged. Frequent travel can also be stressful.

Recovering from adrenal fatigue requires a change in lifestyle beginning with resolving the offending stress. The first step is to identify who or what you are allowing to drain your energy. Is it a frustrating job with long hours or a demanding boss? Are your primary relationships unsupportive? Is your diet deficient in nutrients and laden with toxins? Is your home or work environment toxic? No matter how hopeless the situation may appear we can always take action. We can change the situation to ease the stress such as improving our diet and detoxing our body, going to bed earlier, rearranging our priorities or getting relationship counseling. We can alter the

way we perceive the situation, focusing on the benefits and opportunities presented, or we can leave the offensive environment or person.

Diet plays a crucial role in restoring adrenal function. Avoid sugar, processed foods, caffeine and other stimulants that batter and exhaust the adrenals. Eat fermented foods to enhance digestion, immunity and energy. A protein-rich breakfast and lunch will sustain blood sugar levels throughout the day. Vegans typically struggle more with adrenal fatigue. Diet should also include complex carbohydrates including whole grains and vegetables, and healthy fats such as coconut, flax, olive and pumpkin seed oil to support the adrenals and provide energy. Take a teaspoon of Himalayan salt sole saline solution in 8 oz. of water each morning and add this salt to the diet for trace minerals and to restore sodium-potassium balance.

Have breakfast by 9 am, lunch by 1 pm, and dinner by 6 pm for optimum digestion, balanced blood sugar and fuel for the adrenals. Skipping meals is a disaster for those with adrenal fatigue. Eating a light protein snack midmorning, late afternoon and before bedtime helps sustain blood sugar through the day and night for balanced energy and uninterrupted sleep.

Nutritional supplements that are essential for adrenal recovery are vitamin C, oral and topical magnesium (the spark plug for the adrenals, cellular energy and enzyme production), calcium, B-complex, pantothenic acid, B6, niacin, vitamin E, vitamin D3, digestive enzymes, and probiotics. Adaptogenic herbs licorice root, maca, Siberian ginseng, ashwaganda, ginger root, and ginkgo support the adrenals and ease stress. A nourishing supplement for rebuilding the adrenals is bovine or porcine adrenal gland cell extracts. These are not hormone replacements like synthetic cortisols which shut down the adrenals, but instead provide essential substances for adrenal repair. Hypothalamus, pituitary and thyroid gland extracts may also be included to restore overall hormonal balance. Seaweed extracts and/or iodine is also advised to support the thyroid. Indiumase (trace mineral indium) enhances mineral absorption to all of the glands, helping to balance blood sugar, support the adrenals, restore hair color, enable deep restful sleep and increase daytime energy. If needed, an herbal formula of valerian, passion flower and hops will help to calm the nervous system and encourage a good night's sleep.

Joyful emotions boost the adrenals and enhance well being. Though the demands of daily life can be overwhelming, it is important to honor our own needs and desires by engaging in fun activities that bring happiness into our lives. Periodic vacations provide a change of scenery, recharge our adrenal batteries and rejuvenate our total being. Meditation and slow deep abdominal breathing allow the adrenals to rest and relax the body and mind. A walk in the woods or swim in the sea are balancing and revitalizing as are yoga, tai chi, dancing, or any other form of enjoyable exercise. As the adrenals become stronger, more active sustained exercise will oxygenate the system and increase strength and stamina. Above all, focus on gratitude and empowerment. By choosing uplifting thoughts and beliefs, we will attract positive people and situations into our lives, creating strong adrenals that support us in joy.

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