



Adrenal burnOUT

Feeling stressed and exhausted?

Assess your risk, and learn natural treatments
for this common ailment

By Liz Barker

If you are overworked, overstressed, or simply feel perpetually frazzled, listen up: Constant stress could end up seriously compromising your body's natural ability to reenergize. Known as adrenal fatigue, this big-time energy crash seems to be saddling more and more Americans with health troubles that range from irregular menstrual cycles to low blood sugar. "It's very likely that a person will experience adrenal fatigue at some point in her life, especially in our fast-paced world," says Scottsdale, Arizona-based Courtney Crance, NMD, who estimates that about 70 percent of her patients complain of feeling burnt out.

The adrenal glands secrete cortisol and adrenaline, hormones that kick into high gear during moments of intense anxiety or physical strain. But if stress has become your status quo, ceaseless cortisol and adrenaline secretion may deplete your adrenal glands and wipe out energy reserves. "Many people don't realize that stress has such a significant impact on their bodies," says Susan Fekety, RN, MSN, CNM, a nurse practitioner and lifestyle counselor at True North Health Center in Falmouth, Maine. "But I think it's a mistake to say that unless you have a severe adrenal disorder, such as Addison's disease or Cushing's syndrome, you don't have an adrenal problem." ➤

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COULD IT BE **adrenal fatigue?**

An overall lack of energy and inability to handle stress are the biggest indicators of adrenal fatigue. But many patients show other signs and symptoms, including:

- » allergies
- » low blood sugar
- » dizziness upon standing
- » low libido
- » hair loss
- » menstrual irregularities
- » headaches
- » muscle and/or joint pain
- » increased reliance on caffeine
- » recurrent infections
- » insomnia
- » salt cravings
- » intolerance to heat and/or cold
- » weight gain
- » low blood pressure

If you think you may have adrenal fatigue, consider visiting a holistic health care practitioner. Testing may include the Adrenal Stress Index, which measures cortisol levels four times over 24 hours. “Someone with adrenal fatigue has very low cortisol levels across the 24-hour period and may also have a cortisol spike in the middle of the night,” explains Courtney Crance, NMD.

Sources: Courtney Crance, NMD; *Hormones, Health, and Happiness* (Wellness Central, 2007) by Steven F. Hotze.

Although stress affects everyone in different ways, Crance finds that most people endure two to five years of a high-pressure lifestyle before reaching adrenal fatigue. “The amount of time it takes to recover depends on how depleted you are, but it can be anywhere from months to years,” she adds. The good news: Simple tweaks to your self-care regimen can work wonders in boosting your adrenal health. Here’s how.

Pump up your C and B. Vitamins C and B5 are particularly critical for adrenal health. Up your vitamin C intake by eating plenty of sweet red peppers, citrus fruits, brussels sprouts, cauliflower, cabbage, kale, collards, mustard greens, broccoli, spinach, and strawberries. Foods rich in B5 include brewer’s yeast, egg yolks, avocados, cashew nuts, peanuts, brown rice, soybeans, lentils, and broccoli. A multivitamin can help ensure you’re getting enough, but you may need to take additional supplements to reach optimal levels (for vitamin C, up to 1–2 grams per day; and B5, 100–200 mg per day).

Avoid low blood sugar. “When your blood sugar goes up and down in response to eating sugar and refined carbs, your adrenals have to kick in to help your body function,” says Fekety. Because the body perceives low blood sugar as a sign of starvation, Fekety explains, it turns to the adrenal glands to bring blood-sugar levels back up by pumping out more cortisol and adrenaline. “So if you’re on that sugar rollercoaster, you’re going to end up exhausting your storehouse of energy.” Try eating six small meals instead of three large meals daily, suggests Santa Monica, California-based acupuncturist, herbalist, and nutritionist Mindy Boxer, PhD, LAc.

Kick caffeine. Or, if that’s impossible, enjoy it in moderation. “Using inauthentic energy—such as caffeine—to prop up your body will only burn out your adrenals,” cautions Fekety. “Caffeine overstimulates the adrenals—sometimes to the point that they eventually fail.” Tame your caffeine consumption by switching to herbal brews or less-caffeinated, antioxidant-rich green tea.

Adapt with adaptogens. Adaptogens are a class of herbs that help boost our ability to deal with stress, whether it be physical or mental. “Adaptogens are great for increasing your energy levels if they’re low, and enhancing your mental and physical performance,” says Mary Shackelton, MPH, ND, based in Boulder, Colorado. “But rather than overstimulating the adrenals, like caffeine does, adaptogens actually support proper function and help the adrenals produce cortisol in natural patterns.” Try rhodiola (*Rhodiola rosea*), which was found to reduce fatigue in 56 physicians on night duty in a 2000 study published in *Phytomedicine*; or ginseng (*Panax ginseng*), shown to decrease chronic stress in a 2003 study published in the *Journal of Pharmacological Sciences*.

Take a timeout. The most important part of treating adrenal fatigue, Crance says, is lifestyle modification. Managing overall stress is key, so try to incorporate daily tension-melting practices, such as deep breathing, meditation, or even a long walk with your dog. Yoga may be particularly soothing, according to a 2003 study from Thomas Jefferson University’s Center for Integrative Medicine: In examining 16 men and women with no past yoga experience, researchers found that a single, one-hour yoga session significantly lowered blood cortisol levels.

Even a five-minute timeout in the middle of a chaotic day can help your adrenals heal, according to Boxer. “Everyone has some amount of stress that needs to be addressed,” she says. “There are a lot of things we can’t control, whether it’s our genetic predisposition or just being stuck on the freeway during rush hour. But we do have a choice when it comes to how we treat our bodies—what we eat or drink, and the thoughts we think.” ■

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