

## Adrenal Function and Your Health

### The Adrenal Glands

The purpose of your adrenal glands is to help your body cope with stresses and survive. In fact, the adrenals are known as the "glands of stress". It is their job to enable your body to deal with stress from every possible source, ranging from injury and disease to work and relationship problems. Your resiliency, endurance and your very life all depend on their proper functioning.

No bigger than a walnut and weighing less than a grape, each of your two adrenal glands sits like a tiny pyramid on top of a kidney. From this central location they not only significantly affect the functioning of every tissue, organ and gland in your body, they also have important effects on how you think and feel.

The hormones secreted by your adrenals influence all of the major physiological processes in your body. They closely affect the utilization of carbohydrates and fats, the conversion of fats and proteins into energy, the distribution of stored fat, normal blood sugar regulation, and proper cardiovascular and gastrointestinal function. The protective activity of anti-inflammatory and anti-oxidant hormones secreted by the adrenals helps to minimize negative and allergic reactions to alcohol, drugs, foods and environmental allergens. After mid-life (menopause in women), the adrenal glands gradually become the major source of the sex hormones circulating throughout the body in both men and women. These hormones themselves have a whole host of physical, emotional and psychological effects, from the level of your sex drive to the tendency to gain weight. Even your propensity to develop certain kinds of diseases and your ability to respond to chronic illness is influenced significantly by the adrenal glands. The more chronic the illness, the more critical the adrenal response becomes. You cannot live without your adrenal hormones and as you can see, how well you live depends a great deal on how well your adrenal glands function.

### What is Adrenal Fatigue?

Adrenal fatigue is usually not severe enough to be featured on TV or to be considered a medical emergency. In fact, modern medicine does not recognize it as a distinct syndrome. Nevertheless, it can wreak havoc with your life. In the more serious cases of adrenal fatigue, the activity of the adrenal glands is so diminished that the person may have difficulty getting out of bed for more than a few hours per day.

With each increment of reduction in adrenal function, every organ and system in your body is more profoundly affected. Changes occur in your carbohydrate, protein and fat metabolism, fluid and electrolyte balance, heart and cardiovascular system, and even sex drive. Many other alterations take place at the biochemical and cellular levels. Your body does its best to compensate for under-functioning adrenal glands, but it does so at a price.

### What Causes Adrenal Fatigue?

Adrenal fatigue, in all its mild and severe forms, is usually caused by some form of stress. Stress can be physical, emotional, psychological, environmental, infectious or a combination of these. It is important to know that your adrenals respond to every kind of stress the same, whatever the source. Life's stresses at their worst come in the form of such cataclysmic events as the death of a loved one, an automobile accident or a serious illness. But stress can also take its toll in less obvious ways, like an abscessed tooth, a bout of the flu, intense physical exertion, a severe quarrel with a loved one, pressure at the workplace, an unhappy relationship, environmental toxins, poor diet,



etc. If these smaller stresses occur simultaneously, accumulate or become chronic, and the adrenals have no opportunity to fully recover, adrenal fatigue is usually the result. Its symptoms are clear, distinct and sometime, uncomfortably familiar.

### Who Suffers From Adrenal Fatigue?

Anyone who does not get enough rest and relaxation to enjoy life, who drives him/herself constantly, who is never satisfied or is a perfectionist, who is under constant pressure (especially with few outlets for emotional release), who feels trapped or helpless, who feels overwhelmed by repeated or continuous difficulties, or who has experienced severe or chronic emotional or physical trauma or illness is probably already suffering from some degree of adrenal fatigue. Do you recognize any of these patterns in your own life? Anyone can get adrenal fatigue, and the ability to withstand stress varies, but there are some primary lifestyle factors that lead to adrenal fatigue (note that most of these are within your control!):

- Lack of sleep
- Poor food choices
- Using food and drinks as stimulants when tired
- Staying up late even though fatigued
- Being constantly in a position of powerlessness
- Constantly driving yourself
- Trying to be perfect
- Staying in no-win situations over time
- Lack of enjoyable and rejuvenating activities

Life events can also lead to adrenal fatigue. Some examples are:

- Unrelieved pressure or frequent crises at work and/or home
- Any severe emotional trauma
- Death of a close friend or family member
- Major surgery – with incomplete recovery or subsequent persistent fatigue
- Prolonged or severe respiratory infections
- Serious burns – including severe sunburn
- Head trauma
- Loss of stable job
- Sudden change in financial status
- Relocation without support of friends or family
- Repeated or overwhelming chemical exposure (including drug and alcohol abuse)

### Signs and Symptoms of Adrenal Fatigue

- Difficulty getting up in the morning
- Continuing fatigue not relieved by sleep
- Craving for salt or salty foods
- Lethargy (lack of energy)
- Increased effort to do everyday tasks
- Decreased sex drive
- Decreased ability to handle stress
- Increased time to recover from illness, injury, or trauma
- Light-headed when standing up quickly
- Mild depression
- Less enjoyment or happiness with life
- Increased PMS



- Symptoms increase if meals are skipped or inadequate
- Thoughts less focused, more fuzzy
- Memory less accurate
- Decreased tolerance
- Don't really wake up until 10 am, afternoon low between 3 and 4 pm, feels better after evening meal
- Decreased productivity

## The Diagnosis of Adrenal Fatigue

Adrenal fatigue, under many different names, has been recognized, written about, discussed and treated for over one hundred years. It has been dealt with by thousands of doctors, both personally and clinically. Yet today, it is still not taught in conventional medical schools. The average physician is therefore unaware of its presence and so, not surprisingly, seldom looks for it. Even endocrinologists (specialists in treating disorders of the endocrine glands, which include the adrenal glands) rarely recognize adrenal fatigue as a distinct condition or are prepared to treat it.

Most of the time, recognition of signs and symptoms is the basis of a diagnosis of adrenal fatigue. Testing is available, however: both physical exams and salivary and urine tests, which can confirm the extent of the adrenal fatigue.

## General Rules for Adrenal Fatigue

### Do These Things:

- Be in bed before 10 p.m.  
Sleep in until 9 a.m. whenever possible.
- Look for things that make you laugh. Do something pleasurable every day.
- Eliminate things in your life that drain your energy.
- Take your suggested supplements regularly.
- Move your body and breathe deeply.
- Believe in your ability to recover
- Learn which foods make you feel bad and avoid them.
- Salt your food; salt your water.
- If you are to have fruit, have some with salt before or after and chew very well.

### Avoid These Things:

- Getting overtired.
- Caffeine, sugar, alcohol and white flour products.
- Coffee, even decaf.
- Staying up past 11 pm.
- Pushing yourself.
- Energy suckers.
- Being harsh or negative with yourself.
- Feeling sorry for yourself.
- Foods you are addicted to.
- Food you suspect an allergy or sensitivity to.
- Never skip breakfast.
- Avoid fruit in the morning.
- Never eat starchy carbohydrates (bread, pasta) by themselves.



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Adapted from [Adrenal Fatigue, The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Stress Syndrome](#), 2001 by James L. Wilson, ND, DC, PhD.