

Newsletter

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Adrenal Fatigue and Constant Stress

Shaun Riddle N.D.
chiropracticperformancecentre.ca

Stress, stress, and more stress are the conditions that most of us operate under each day of our lives. Between our obligations at home and in our families very few of us have time for ourselves. Even exercise can be perceived as stress by a body that is already overwhelmed.

In fact I see a lot of people in my practice that have not changed their eating or exercise habits in years but have found that with their high stress lives, they are steadily gaining weight and are unable to lose it, especially around their waist.

Adrenal Fatigue

The organs that help us manage our stress are our adrenal glands. They are tiny stress hormone producers that sit on the top of each kidney. Among the most notable hormones that they produce are adrenaline, DHEA and cortisol. Under chronic or extreme stress, the production of these hormones declines because the adrenal glands become exhausted. Stresses like these can take the form of psychological stress (emotional, work, family, etc.), extreme exercise, surgery, toxic exposure, and infections that go undetected (often called sub-clinical).

Although adrenal fatigue has been described for over one hundred years, it is only recently being recognized as a unique condition with a specific set of symptoms. Some of the major symptoms include:

- Fatigue and tiredness; general feeling of being wiped out
- Weight gain and inability to lose weight despite effort
- Frequent colds and flu
- Anxiety
- Sleep difficulties
- Difficulty concentrating and problems retaining information
- Allergies
- Symptoms of PMS

Adrenal fatigue is generally diagnosed based on the constellation of the symptoms above as well as others. Often the symptoms are so clear that lab testing is not necessary to confirm the diagnosis, however there are special tests available if indicated.

Cortisol

Cortisol is probably the most important adrenal hormone that is released when we experience stress. This hormone increases the sugar in our blood so that we have the fuel we need to escape danger. The fat cells around our waist respond particularly well to cortisol. When we don't burn the sugar that's been released into the bloodstream by cortisol, it gets deposited as fat around our waist. This is why we tend to gain weight around our midsection under stress. The body's response to stress, by depositing fat, is often overlooked by those struggling with weight loss even though it is a significant cause of weight gain.

Normally, cortisol is released twice throughout the day. Any other releases of cortisol come as a result of our body's response to stress or to low blood sugar. As you are probably realizing, the more stress a person goes through during the day, the more cortisol is released from the adrenal glands.

On a chemical level, we are designed to handle "fight or flight" (intense, short-duration) stress much better than the chronic low-level stress we are subjected to every day. Because of this, when we experience stress, our blood sugar levels rise in preparation for a quick get-away or a fight for our lives. Most of the time, we are not in life or death situations and do not use that newly released sugar so it is deposited on our trunks as fat.

DHEA is another important hormone that is normally released by the adrenal glands. It is responsible for the production of testosterone and estrogen. These hormones are instrumental in our sense of well-being. DHEA declines with age and most degenerative diseases are correlated with low DHEA levels. In times of intense or prolonged stress, DHEA levels plummet and stay low when someone becomes adrenally fatigued.

Stages of Adrenal Fatigue

There are four stages of progression to full-blown adrenal exhaustion. They are called the stages of Maladaptive Stress Syndrome:

Stage 1: Alarm

This first stage is characterized by an increased output of cortisol and adrenaline in response to stress. The body's response is called the "fight or flight" response. As the stress continues, the adrenal glands start to become taxed due to the increasing demands by the body for cortisol production. As a result, we can begin to overreact to small stressors.

Stage 2: Resistance

This stage is characterized by chronic stress and cortisol production. The results are weight gain, fluid retention and immune suppression. Chronic colds, flu and fungal infections like chronic sinusitis become more and more common. A tendency toward developing conditions such as diabetes, osteoporosis and arteriosclerosis begins.

Stage 3: Exhaustion

In this stage, the adrenal glands become fatigued and cannot continue to produce cortisol in response to stress. Fatigue becomes the hallmark of the exhaustion stage and the development of chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia begins. The body can no longer manage stress so panic attacks, anxiety, irritability, low blood sugar, low blood pressure and immune dysfunction are common.

Stage 4: Failure

Once this stage is reached, there is total failure of the adrenal glands in response to stress. People at this stage are very susceptible to cardiovascular collapse and death in the face of stress.

Recovery from Adrenal Fatigue

Recovery from adrenal fatigue can take anywhere from 3 months to 3 years. Each individual has a unique set of symptoms and an individual response to treatment. The recovery process depends upon the stage and severity of the adrenal exhaustion. The road back to health from adrenal fatigue includes specific diet & lifestyle changes, nutritional support, herbal treatments as well as bio-identical hormone support. Each person has unique biochemical needs that must be addressed by a physician but there are several things everyone can do to reduce the impact of adrenal fatigue.

- Eat breakfast every morning soon after rising
- Eat lunch before noon if possible
- Eat a total of 5 smaller meals spread throughout the day (3 meals + 2 snacks)
- Reduce sugar and starchy foods from the diet (breads, potatoes, pastas, sugary fruits, fruit juices, etc.)

- Eliminate coffee and caffeinated teas
- Ensure each meal and snack has a good quality protein and fat
- Get to sleep before 10 pm and sleep 8-10 hours if possible
- Light to moderate exercise...avoid extreme exercise

All of these are aimed at reducing the amount of cortisol that your body must produce, which in turn will lessen the impact of daily stress. However the number one things everyone must do is:

• ***Identify and eliminate the chronic stresses in your life!***

Often this may mean considering a job and lifestyle change, as well as thoroughly addressing any relationship or family issues. In a minority of cases, it can mean addressing chronic sub-clinical infections or eliminating accumulated toxic burdens. Although addressing these issues can be difficult and life-altering, it is necessary in order to achieve a full recovery.