



ADRENAL FATIGUE

Definition

Adrenal fatigue is a common condition whereby our adrenal glands no longer function at their optimal level. It occurs after weeks, months or years of overproduction of adrenal hormones in response to stress from our busy, overloaded, stressful lives. It can have a profound effect on our health.

Epidemiology

Adrenal fatigue is extremely common with a large percentage of the population suffering from some degree of adrenal exhaustion. It is not a condition generally "diagnosed" by doctors.

Physiology

Our adrenal glands sit above each of our kidneys. When stressed, two things happen. Hormones are released by the hypothalamus in the brain and impulses are generated by the sympathetic nervous system. These triggers cause the adrenals to release adrenaline and cortisol (the stress hormone) which in turn cause changes in the body to help cope with stress. This is known as the fight or flight response. It results in an increase in the heart rate, and a reduction of blood away from our organs that are not immediately required in a crisis. Instead blood flow increases in our muscles to allow us to "flee" from dangers, as well as in the brain to assist with on the spot decisions required in a "crisis".

Cortisol and adrenaline also cause the liver to release glucose (from its glycogen stores) into the bloodstream. While this may be a good thing in the short term, continual stress means this response is happening continuously at a low level. This causes the adrenals to become "exhausted" and eventually unable to produce these hormones at the required level. Our bodies are still under the same level of stress but we no longer have the same levels of adrenaline and cortisol to help us cope. This progression from adrenal overproduction to underproduction occurs in 3 stages.

Stage 1 – Alarm. This is the flight or fight response phase and is meant to be a short term phenomenon, followed by a 24 to 48 hour period of recovery. During this time energy stores recover and the adrenals are replenished with the nutrients required when the next hit of cortisol is needed.

Stage 2 – Adaptation. During this stage cortisol levels are chronically elevated over a prolonged period of time. Although we seem to have returned to normal functioning, the body is still reacting at a constant low level. Some people can stay in this stage for a long period of time while others may progress rapidly to stage 3. Others can continually jump between the last 2 stages.

Stage 3 – Exhaustion. During this stage the adrenals become exhausted and cease producing the required amount of adrenaline and cortisol, despite the still high level of stress.

Causes

It is important to understand that the onset and duration of adrenal fatigue has great individual variation and one person may withstand a stress quite easily but another person may find the same stress overwhelming and difficult to manage. Below are some of the contributing factors that lead to adrenal fatigue.

- Excessive stressful life events such as a change in financial status, death of friend or family, divorce, moving residence, loss or change of job, parenting or dealing with prolonged illness.
 - Being in a position of constant pressure but having no ability to control the workload
- The following causes are things you, very likely, have the power to modify.
- Constantly pushing yourself without balancing it with enjoyable and rejuvenating activities

- Trying to be perfect and having excessive expectations of yourself
- Pushing yourself late into the evening regardless of obvious tiredness
- Poor food choices and using food and drinks as stimulants when tired
- Lack of good quality sleep

Symptoms

The presence of a 'collection' of the following symptoms may suggest adrenal fatigue at either stage 2 or 3.

- Energy stores become depleted and can cause fatigue and lethargy, making it especially difficult to get up in the morning. This fatigue is frequently not relieved by sleep.
- Serotonin levels drop and can lead to insomnia and mood changes including anxiety and depression. A decreased ability to handle stress and lack of enjoyment of life.
- Increased difficulties in concentrating and less memory recall with intervals of confusion, often accompanied with less tolerance level and being more easily frustrated.
- The digestive system function declines and can begin to cause issues such as irritable bowel symptoms and a lowered ability to breakdown and absorb nutrients.
- The function of the thyroid and reproductive systems suffer because the hormones produced by these systems are depleted in adrenal fatigue. Symptoms such as PMS, irregular cycles and fertility problems can result.
- Our immune systems begin to suffer and we are more likely to develop allergies, and pick up colds and infections, and when we do, they are likely to hit harder and last longer.
- Bone demineralisation increases leading to lower bone density and osteoporosis.
- Storage of fat around the abdomen tends to increase leading to weight gain and greater risk of insulin resistance with blood sugar regulation problems which potentially leads onto diabetes, high blood pressure and other cardiovascular disease risks. If addressed early enough this is preventable.
- Cravings for salt or salty foods.
- Using caffeine and sugary foods as stimulants to get your through the day.
- Unable to wake up till after 10am, afternoon fatigue around 3-4pm and feeling better after the evening meal around 6pm.
- Decreased libido.

Diagnosis and Pathology

Conventional medicine will only test blood levels of cortisol and only diagnose Addisons Disease or Cushing Disease which occur at either extreme of the cortisol spectrum. However this leaves a vast array of cortisol levels which are considered normal by medical standards but are suboptimal and will have a direct impact on health.

The most common test performed by a Natural Health Practitioner is a salivary cortisol test. Saliva samples are collected at 4 critical times throughout the day. There are also a number of helpful questionnaires to screen you for the symptoms of adrenal fatigue, and your Natural Health Practitioner can arrange these for you at little or no cost. The questionnaires can give a good indication of the existence of adrenal fatigue prior to or alternative to a saliva or blood test. Your natural health practitioner can provide and analyse these questionnaires for you.

Dietary and lifestyle advice

The good news is that it is possible to recuperate from adrenal fatigue and prevent further deterioration through the use of a number of lifestyle, dietary and psychological strategies. The aim of treatment is to improve the emotional, mental and physical response to stress, reduce the stress exposure, and to restore the adrenal gland function.

- Stimulants such as tea and coffee should be reduced and then ideally eliminated.
- Carbohydrate cravings often accompany the fatigue of adrenal exhaustion but their over consumption leads to many of the issues described under symptoms. For this reason the amount of carbohydrates consumed should be monitored and more emphasis placed on high protein snacks such as fish, nuts and eggs.
- Healthy, wholesome foods should be consumed every 3-4 hours. Going for prolonged periods without food is an added stress on the body.
- Taking regular time out and getting 8-10 hours of sleep a night are also important.
- Mindfulness meditation has been shown to assist coping ability.
- Other therapies such as acupuncture, massage, reiki and even art and music therapy have also been shown to clinically reduce anxiety and depression and modulate stress levels. At times, seeking professional counselling or psychologist treatments may be advisable. Your Natural Healthcare Practitioner can help you decide which treatment will be best for you.

In addition to the above your natural health care practitioner can prescribe various herbal medicines

and supplements to assist your recovery and encourage energy production. Foods and supplements containing vitamin C, B-vitamins, magnesium, fish oils and adaptogenic herbs such as Rhodiola and Ginseng are also very replenishing and help the body cope with stress.

Practitioner Advice

None

References

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