

Stress and Adrenal Gland Function

Adrenal fatigue is one of the most common problems we treat in our office. Besides dizziness on standing (called postural hypotension) adrenal fatigue can also cause panic attacks, poor sugar handling, chronic inflammation, sleep disturbances, etc. Adrenal function is also closely tied to thyroid function, so when the adrenals become fatigued they can put an extra strain on the thyroid, eventually leading to hypothyroidism as well. This can add to the clinical picture symptoms such as depression, weight gain, hair loss and lead to other organ dysfunction. The adrenals are often fatigued because of too much stress, sugar, or caffeine.

Adrenal fatigue is a collection of signs and symptoms, known as a “syndrome,” that results when the adrenal glands function, but not at their optimal level. Most commonly associated with intense or prolonged stress, it can also arise during or after acute or chronic infections, especially respiratory infections such as influenza, bronchitis or pneumonia. As the name suggests, its paramount symptom is fatigue that is not relieved by sleep. However, it is not a disease or as readily identifiable as diabetes or a growth on the end of your finger. You may look and act relatively normal while experiencing adrenal fatigue and may not have any obvious signs of physical illness, yet you live with a general sense of un-wellness, tiredness or “grey” feelings. People whose adrenals are fatigued often use coffee, colas and other stimulants to get going in the morning and to prop themselves up during the day.

This syndrome has been known by many other names throughout the past century, such as non-Addison’s hypoadrenia, sub-clinical hypoadrenia, neurasthenia, adrenal neurasthenia, adrenal apathy and adrenal fatigue. Although it affects millions of people in the U.S. and around the world, conventional medicine does not yet recognize it as a distinct syndrome.

Adrenal fatigue can wreak havoc with your life. In the more serious cases, the activity of the adrenal glands is so diminished that you may have difficulty getting out of bed for more than a few hours a day. With each increment of reduction in adrenal function, every organ and system in your body is more profoundly affected. Changes may occur in your carbohydrate, protein and fat metabolism, blood sugar balance, energy production, fluid and electrolyte balance, cardiovascular function, sleep patterns, mood, menstrual and menopausal symptoms, and even sex drive. Many other alterations can take place at the biochemical and cellular levels in response to, and to compensate for, the decrease in adrenal hormones that occurs with adrenal fatigue. Your body does its best to make up for under-functioning adrenal glands but, in the process, can create other problems.

Symptoms

Morning fatigue - You don’t really seem to “wake up” until 10 a.m.

Afternoon “low” (feelings of sleepiness or clouded thinking) from 2 to 4 p.m.

Burst of energy around 6 p.m. - You finally feel better from your afternoon lull

Sleepiness at 9 to 10 p.m. - However, you resist going to sleep

“Second wind” at 11 p.m. that lasts until about 1 a.m., when you finally go to sleep

Cravings for foods high in salt and fat

Increased PMS or menopausal symptoms

Mild depression

Lack of energy

Decreased ability to handle stress

Muscular weakness

Increased allergies

Lightheadedness when getting up from a sitting or lying down position

Decreased sex drive

Frequent sighing

Inability to handle foods high in potassium or carbohydrates unless they’re combined with fats and protein