

Natural treatments for adrenal fatigue — restoring the energy you thought was lost

by Marcelle Pick, OB/GYN NP

“If only I had the energy I used to...” We’ve probably all said these words at some point, and I hear it in my practice on a daily basis. Fatigue is something I’ve noticed many women succumb to, seldom questioning whether or not they can get to the root of it. My patients are skeptical when I assure them that as long as there are no other major health issues causing their fatigue we can absolutely get them back to feeling as energetic and vibrant as they did in their younger years. Often it’s a matter of supporting two plum-sized glands that many women have never even heard of.

Are your adrenals imbalanced?

If the answer to more than one of these questions is yes, you may consider talking to a functional medicine practitioner about your adrenal glands.

- Are you always on the run?
- Do you feel like you “can never do enough”?
- Does everything seem like it’s a whole lot harder for you than it should be?
- Do you find it difficult to get out of bed in the morning?
- Do you use caffeine or sugar to bolster your flagging energy in the afternoon?
- Do you feel weary and irritable much of the time?
- Do you often crave salty foods or binge on sugar?
- Do you fall asleep while reading or while watching movies?
- Do you struggle to “come down” at night so you can get to sleep?

Along with several other key responsibilities, your adrenal glands’ primary responsibility is to help you survive in the face of stress. And they react to every kind of stress — physical, emotional, perceived, psychological, environmental, infectious, or a combination of these. When the adrenals are tapped out, women can end up with issues like thyroid imbalance, weight gain, and severe fatigue. Unfortunately, conventional medicine has nothing to offer women with adrenal imbalance unless they’re diagnosed with a full-blown adrenal disease, like Cushing’s or Addison’s disease. So many reach for temporary fixes like caffeine, refined carbs, and sugar to boost their energy, which only heightens the problem.

But there’s light at the end of the tunnel, I promise! If it’s time to take an honest look at your adrenal health, you’ve come to the right place. There are so many natural treatment options at your fingertips, options that can help you heal and restore your adrenal glands gently instead of putting more stress on them. Let’s take a closer look at how *phytotherapy* — the use of medicinal plants to heal and restore balance — can support your adrenals and allow you to get your energy back.

Adrenal drain can deplete the whole body

As our adrenals encounter and thwart more and more stress without replenishment, many things can happen in the body. In addition to their primary role in dealing with stress, your adrenal glands:

- balance more than 50 hormones in your body

- synthesize their own hormones, including stress and sex hormones
- help regulate blood pressure and heart beat regularity
- help balance blood sugar levels
- help quell inflammation throughout the body
- support nervous system function (behavior, mood, excitability, memory, clarity of thought)

Because the adrenals are intimately linked to so *many* other systems in our bodies, women with exhausted adrenals can end up with weight gain, fuzzy thinking, insomnia, severe fatigue, thyroid disorders, and accelerated aging. For more on the connection between adrenals and thyroid, see our article on hypothyroidism in menopause.

Sources: See box at base of References & further reading.

“I need energy! What’s wrong with leaning on caffeine and sugar?”

When we’re exhausted and need to press on, it seems logical to reach for something that will give us immediate energy. With most of my patients this means caffeine, refined carbohydrates, sugar — or all of the above. Sure, caffeine and sugar are stimulants derived from plants, but that doesn’t mean they’re good for us! The problem with an excess of caffeine, sugar, and carbs is that they simply add more stress on the adrenal glands, making them work even harder instead of giving them a break.

Here’s what happens with caffeine and your adrenals: stimulants like caffeine can keep the adrenal hormones *adrenaline* and *cortisol* artificially high and prevent the body from fully resting. Adrenaline and cortisol are crucial in the face of stress, but abnormal levels can be detrimental over the long-term. Resting is the most natural way to restore our adrenal glands, and doing so on a regular basis allows them to give us energy during the times we need it. If you’re feeling exhausted, your body is telling you to sleep, not that you have a caffeine deficiency!

In the case of too much sugar — or any other refined carbohydrates — our blood sugar spikes so high that the pancreas has to release a large load of insulin to deal with the sugar spike. *Insulin* is the hormone responsible for ushering sugar into our cells, providing the instant energy behind a “sugar rush.” But after a dramatic spike in insulin, blood sugar levels rapidly crash, leading to another round of low blood sugar (*hypoglycemia*) and possibly more cravings for sugar or caffeine.

In healthy people, this low blood sugar alerts the adrenals to release cortisol, which helps us recover by converting stored proteins, fats, and sugars into glucose, to push blood sugar back up to normal. But in my patients who have reached adrenal fatigue, cortisol production is already so low that recovery is a challenge. The result is severe ongoing fatigue.

Phytotherapy for adrenal health — how plants work with us instead of against us

As much as you may savor your three o’clock latte or chocolate chip cookie, there is a much healthier way to bring your energy back — and the great news is, it *supports* your adrenals rather than depleting them. *Phytotherapy* uses plants, either in whole-food form or in standardized extracts and supplements, for the purpose of healing. I’m excited that the power of phytotherapy is finally becoming recognized in the United States. People around the world have

practiced botanical medicine and followed a plant-based diet for thousands of years. But now we have evidence-based research to back up phytotherapy's treatment benefits.

Why do plants hold such wonderful healing properties? First of all, as humans we've evolved alongside the plant world, so our genes are well-versed in their language. Second of all, many medicinal plants hold *adaptogenic* properties, meaning their molecules communicate all along our metabolic pathways, "reading" what our bodies need at that moment in time and then providing it, instead of flooding the system without a real sense of what it needs. This is very different from pharmaceutical drugs that have been formulated to be effective on everyone, and therefore tend to deliver large doses of medication that slam the system.

Plant geneticist I.I. Brekhman, who first defined the term "adaptogen," suggested that an adaptogenic plant should have four properties:

- be harmless to the host
- have a general, rather non-specific effect
- increase the resistance of the recipient to a variety of physical, chemical, or biological stressors
- act as a general stabilizer/normalizer for the user

In dedicating his life's work to phytotherapy, Dr. Brekhman helped bring the adaptogenic herb *eleuthero* (aka "Siberian ginseng") to the attention of Western science. Researchers in the US and around the globe have since built upon his pioneering studies, demonstrating that *eleuthero* supports the adrenal glands with its anti-fatigue and anti-stress properties. In 2009, Swedish researchers proposed one way it does this: by increasing the specific molecules we typically release to protect the body against physical and emotional stress.

These "molecular chaperones" help treat and repair damaged proteins during times of intense physical demand. Having more "repair" molecules on board helps build our tolerance to stress and allows for less physical destruction. In Australia, another team demonstrated how *eleuthero*, in true adaptogenic form, inhibits the binding of stress hormones to their receptors (see illustration of adaptogenic receptor-blocking in my article on phytotherapy for hormonal imbalance).

And there's more — this herb has an enticing trove of properties to explore: new science is uncovering how *eleuthero* bolsters the immune response; dampens inflammation; enhances mental clarity and nervous system function; helps to regulate blood sugar; and may even benefit bone remodeling by increasing the amount of a hormone called *osteocalcin* in the blood.

I'm pleased to report that scores of my multitasking, overworked patients have experienced benefit from *eleuthero* and other adaptogenic herbs with adrenal-supportive properties! But these days many of us have gotten into the habit of demanding immediate results, and when a therapy isn't working right away, we might assume it doesn't work.

Because of its gentle and adaptogenic effects, phytotherapy may take time to work with your body. And what works for one woman may not work for another, but the diverse plant world offers many options to experiment with. So don't give up!

Medicinal herbs for adrenal imbalance — our suggestions

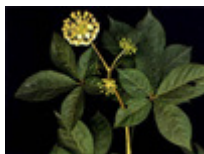
I've seen how worn-out adrenals can affect the whole body, and promise you that natural support implemented before something else goes wrong may save you from a more serious diagnosis. Thankfully, there are so many safe and supportive herbs to help you do this. Here are the herbs I've used with success at the clinic for treating my patients. Remember to listen to your body and monitor your progress as you experiment with phytotherapy. We all react differently to therapeutic agents. If you know you are sensitive, vary your dosages accordingly, and consider working with an experienced herbalist.



- **Astragalus root (*A. membranaceus*).** Astragalus aids in the body's natural ability to adapt to stress, bolstering the immune system so you stay well while helping to regulate normal blood sugar levels and alleviate insulin resistance.



- **Cordyceps (*C. sinensis*).** Cordyceps is a prized antioxidant fungus that can slow aging and take a load off the adrenals by supporting the immune system, balancing the inflammatory response, and helping to stabilize blood sugar.



- **Eleuthero (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*, formerly called *Siberian ginseng*).** As I mentioned above, eleuthero is an adaptogenic herb that can help protect us against the negative effects of stress, while decreasing fatigue, enhancing mental clarity, helping to balance blood sugar, and even perhaps supporting bone remodeling as well.



- **Rhodiola rosea ("golden root").** Rhodiola is another adaptogenic herb that protects against stress-related fatigue and "burnout;" increases mental clarity; and offers immune and blood sugar support. An added benefit of Rhodiola is its antidepressant and anti-anxiety effects.



- **Licorice root (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*).** Well known for supporting adrenal balance, licorice root aids in increasing energy and endurance. Though many of the above herbs can be used relatively freely of restrictions, certain forms of licorice can increase blood pressure and lower potassium and thus, licorice should be used with care and guidance. Adrenal fatigue, in many instances, is accompanied by low blood pressure, so licorice taken at the appropriate times and dosages can be of benefit in those cases. However, this herb is best taken under the care of an herbalist or a functional medicine practitioner.

Remember that in diversity there's strength! Talk to an herbalist or functional medicine practitioner about the right combination of herbs for you. A phytotherapeutic remedy that combines a range of standardized plant extracts, like the one we offer in our Personal Program for Adrenal Health, is most often what brings the best relief.

Remember *real support*, not just one-size-fits-all solutions

Just as we've come to expect immediate results, we've also been convinced that there are one-size-fits-all solutions. It's important to remember that phytotherapy isn't a magic bullet, either. It simply gives us the energy and support to take steps toward healing the adrenals. In order to fully recover, what causes the original stress or stressors has to be addressed.

I had a patient who had encountered a great deal of stress in her life in a matter of six months. The biggest stressor was that her toddler son was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes and needed constant care after a frightening stay in the hospital. She felt drained on a daily basis, began to gain weight, had trouble sleeping, and saw her own blood sugar slowly creep up into pre-diabetes territory. When we started her on a combination herbal therapy, she felt so much better that she then went overboard. She joined a gym, took on more responsibilities at work and at home, and started writing a book! When I talked with her a few weeks ago, I urged her to slow down, and explained that the herbal support is just a piece of healing the adrenals. Even though you may feel infinitely better after starting phytotherapy, you still have to be mindful that the adrenals need rest to heal.

Here are the other supportive measures you can take to ensure a full adrenal recovery:

- **Sleep.** Resist the temptation to burn the candle at both ends! Getting 8-10 hours a night of sleep is one of the best ways to restore your adrenal glands. Take naps if you are able during the day.
- **Modify your exercise.** Mornings are best for aerobic exercise (this is when your cortisol is naturally highest), and try not to let your heart rate go above 90 beats per minute. I recommend relaxing walks, yoga, or any kind of exercise that restores you instead of draining you.
- **Eat well and often.** I have written in the past about how to eat to support your adrenal glands. Eating certain foods and at specific times of the day can help you return to a natural cortisol rhythm and avoid the "crash and burn" of sugar/caffeine highs and lows. One important point — a hungry body puts stress on the adrenals, so don't let yourself go too long without a meal or a snack.
- **Relieve stress.** Schedule a massage or enlist a partner or friend to give you one, practice yoga or qi gong, put up your feet and enjoy a cup of tea, or call a loved one to "just talk." Cultivate whatever it is that relieves tension and stress for you. Even just five minutes a day of quiet breathing or meditation can do wonders for your adrenals.
- **Play.** Take a good look at your life, and cut as many of the things that drain you as possible, replacing them with those that fulfill you. Engage with people, activities, and work you enjoy: go to the beach, play with your grandchildren, go dancing — whatever you have fun doing, give yourself permission to do it during this time of healing. Your adrenals will soak these experiences up with pleasure.

Get your energy back — naturally

In a world where women are expected to do more and more, I know it's difficult to keep up. But you don't have to continue relying on sugar, carbs, and caffeine to make it through the day. And you certainly don't have to feel so tired and miserable anymore. Help is on the way! There are several natural herbal options for adrenal support to boost your energy, prevent further health issues, and help you on your way to healing your adrenals.

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