

Adrenal health in women

by Marcelle Pick, OB/GYN NP

We're all familiar with stress — it's a constant element in women's busy lives. But what we aren't so familiar with is the body's response to stress and the ways in which the stress we face today goes far beyond the kind of stress we faced as we evolved— and ends up depleting our energy and health.

When faced with a stressful situation, our bodies rely on the adrenal glands sitting atop our kidneys to monitor our “fight or flight” response. For the most part, our stress response evolved from short-term events — crises that came and went. If we had to run from a predator, for example, our healthy adrenal glands responded by releasing *adrenaline*, which makes us more alert and focused, and *cortisol*, which converts protein to energy and releases our stored sugar, *glycogen*, so our bodies have the fuel needed to respond quickly. In concert, the adrenal response rapidly increases our heart and respiratory rates and blood pressure while releasing energy, tensing our muscles, sharpening our senses, and slowing our digestion so we are primed to escape or fight back, whichever is needed. When the threat is gone, the body returns to normal — quickly with respect to adrenaline levels, less quickly with respect to cortisol.

Tips for Personal Program Success

Clean your colon. One of the best things you can do is to support your colon by using an Occasional colon cleanse.-The Herb-Lax and Fiber Plan are excellent!

But in today's society, women are inundated with stress –stress that doesn't let up. And when chronic stress repeatedly forces the adrenal glands to sustain high levels of cortisol, two things happen: first, the adrenals can't attend to their broader role in hormonal regulation because the same resources they use to make hormones like estrogen are required to make cortisol, and second, cortisol starts to damage healthy tissues. Eventually, *adrenal fatigue* sets in, and many women experience symptoms such as weight gain, fatigue, insomnia, fuzzy thinking, depression, cravings and mood swings. Once the adrenals become depleted, it can lead to adrenal exhaustion and much more serious health concerns.

We have adapted our own Personal Program nutritional suggestions based on years of research into healthful eating for hormonal balance. This plan restricts sugar and carbohydrates without depriving your body of necessary nutrients. The basic guidelines are as follows:

Choose a high quality supplementation program – We recommend Shaklee due to the high quality that is unlike any other company on the market.

- Eat 3 meals a day and 2 or more snacks.
- Eating every 2 hours is a good idea if you are under stress.
- Eat protein at every meal.
- Eat a vegetable or fruit at every meal. In fact, eat as much as you want when it comes to organic greens and vegetables, as long as they aren't coated with unhealthy fats.
- Include healthy fats in your diet, particularly foods rich in omega-3's. Avoid trans fats.
- Target no more than 60 grams of carbohydrates a day (15 per meal and 7 per snack) while your metabolism heals.
- Limit dairy products to 4 servings a day, preferably organic.
- Completely avoid soft drinks (including diet sodas) and juices with high-fructose corn syrup. Limit use of artificial sweeteners.
- Drink 6–10 glasses each day of filtered water, seltzer, or herbal teas.
- Eliminate/taper sugar, sweets and junk food from your diet.
- Eliminate/taper alcohol — the ultimate “sugar buzz.”
- Eliminate “white food”: white sugar, white flour, white cereal.

□ Be sure to take a fatty acid supplement – like the **Omegaguard** and **GLA Complex**. Your hormonal balance depends on a supply of rich nutrients. In addition to what you eat, a few positive lifestyle habits can really make a difference in how you feel. We have learned that you have to get healthy before you can lose weight and keep it off. Once you create a health foundation, your body will naturally seek and maintain its ideal weight. Remember that a safe and healthy weight loss is 1–2 pounds per week. Here are the things we know work:

- Shop the outside aisles of the grocery store.
- Buy organic and local whenever possible. Pay attention to chemicals, heavy metals, and bacteria in your environment. Shop at farmer’s markets and specialty food stores that have a wider range of healthy foods.
- Stop weighing yourself. Use your dress size as your gauge.
- Start exercising. A 45-minute walk 4–5 times a week is great.
- Get 8 hours of sleep — no exceptions!
- If you recognize that you have a habit of emotional eating, get some counseling. The underlying emotional issues create other health problems too. And they won’t go away without intervention.
- Reduce the stress in your life to the extent you can. Make time for yourself to compensate for when you can’t.
- If you have obvious digestive problems or food sensitivities, consider a hypoallergenic diet or the elimination diet.

Above all the dietary and lifestyle choices you make, learn to love Focus on your health, not your weight. And if you wander from your personal blueprint for health, forgive yourself and step back toward balance. If you can’t do it all, do what you can.

The Shaklee Difference - *The principle of “Products in Harmony with Nature and Good Health” guides Shaklee science. Experts in nutrition, public health, food science, analytical chemistry, biochemistry, herbology, microbiology and engineering staff the 52,000 square feet Forrest C. Shaklee Research Center in Hayward, California. They continue the important research and development that makes each product the world stand for quality.*

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and accept yourself.

Nutritional and Lifestyle Guidelines

by Marcelle Pick, OB/GYN NP

Eating is a primitive urge, like sleeping or going to the bathroom. When food sources are abundant, we are hard-wired to eat as much as our body needs to function, survive, and reproduce, but also — more critically — to store against the possibility of famine. Eating is also a source of comfort and pleasure. This too is hard-wired. When we sit and eat, our bodies get the message that — for the moment — it is okay to relax. We are nurturing ourselves. No hard labor or strenuous physical activity can occur at that moment. This is powerful motivation. What has caught us unawares is the degradation and manipulation of our food supply combined with a major decrease in our physical activity. Over-processed food, refined sugar products, preservatives, trans fats, artificial sweeteners, and food substitutes now populate the bulk of our grocery aisles. Our food is transported thousands of miles and must keep for weeks, losing much of its nutritional value in transit. Today, we drive instead of walk, use machines more often than our muscles, and eat out or on the run more frequently. In addition, we have multi-million dollar industries bent on coercing us to buy and eat a seemingly endless supply of unhealthy food.

Instead of berating ourselves for “cheating” when we eat a food that is not in our best interests, we need to think about the totality of our lifestyle choices with our individual histories and needs (both physical and emotional) in mind.

Let’s face it: Food is good! Eating is fun! It’s no wonder we find it agonizing to deprive ourselves of this most basic and nurturing act. Instead of all the negativity, I’d like to encourage women to rediscover the positive nature of sharing food around the table. It all begins with that magic word: *balance*.

The best way to jumpstart your metabolic function is to eat well (which includes taking a daily multivitamin), and to eat regularly and often — just watch that portion size. And you have a great portion control tool right at hand — your own hand!

- Your thumb = 1 oz
- Your palm = 3–4 oz
- Your closed fist = 1 cup
- Your thumb tip = 1 tsp
- A handful = 1–2 oz of snack food, like nuts

Just as your body needs to be in balance to function well, your meals need balance to provide adequate nutrition. It may be helpful to revise your mental picture of a healthy meal from a pyramid to a square. The square has four compartments: protein, healthy fat, fruits/vegetables, and grains/legumes. Eating three “squares” a day is a good way to think about it; we also want women to have two healthy snacks a day. In fact, the USDA food guide pyramid will soon be adjusted to reflect new Daily Reference Intake (DRI) guidelines based on similar research.

Tips for Personal Program Success

Permission to nurture yourself: Granted. Stress can help create hormonal imbalance. Nurturing self-care can help restore that balance. If, like many women, you spend a lot of your time taking care of everyone else, it’s more important than ever to make time for yourself. Do something to care for your body, your mind and your soul — like getting a massage, a reiki treatment, even taking a nap or hot bath.

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syrup. Limit use of artificial sweeteners.

- Drink 6–10 glasses each day of filtered water, seltzer, or herbal teas.
- Eliminate/taper sugar, sweets and junk food from your diet.
- Eliminate/taper alcohol — the ultimate “sugar buzz.”
- Eliminate “white food”: white sugar, white flour, white cereal.
- Be sure to take a medical-grade nutritional supplement, including a fatty acid supplement. Your hormonal balance depends on a supply of rich nutrients.

In addition to what you eat, a few positive lifestyle habits can really make a difference in how you feel. We have learned that you have to get healthy before you can lose weight and keep it off. Once you create a health foundation, your body will naturally seek and maintain its ideal weight. Remember that a safe and healthy weight loss is 1–2 pounds per week. Here are the things we know work:

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- Get 8 hours of sleep — no exceptions!
- If you recognize that you have a habit of emotional eating, get some counseling. The underlying emotional issues create other health problems too. And they won’t go away without intervention.
- Reduce the stress in your life to the extent you can. Make time for yourself to compensate for when you can’t.
- If you have obvious digestive problems or food sensitivities, consider a hypoallergenic diet or the elimination diet. Discuss getting a bioimpedance analysis from your practitioner.

□ Above all the dietary and lifestyle choices you make, learn to love

Focus on your health, not your weight. And if you wander from your personal blueprint for health, forgive yourself and step back toward balance. If you can’t do it all, do what you can.

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Adrenal extremes — could you be on your way to Cushing's or Addison's disease?

by Marcelle Pick, OB/GYN NP

If you've read my articles before, you already know that our adrenal glands are crucial to our survival and contribute enormously to our overall health and vitality. When constant stress prevails or other health problems lead the adrenals to work on overdrive, underdrive, or to eventually reach exhaustion, we can suffer dramatically. At the extremes, there's Cushing's syndrome (an overproduction of the stress hormone cortisol) and Addison's disease (an underproduction of cortisol). These conditions can be life-threatening, and will likely be diagnosed and treated quickly. But there is a whole lot of adrenal imbalance in between that is often missed.

What most women don't understand is that their adrenal imbalance symptoms can be treated long before they ever develop full-blown adrenal disease — and this can make a profound difference to your whole life. The problem is, unless you've already reached either end of the adrenal spectrum, most well-intentioned conventional practitioners in the US aren't trained to help you. It's so frustrating when I work with a patient on a plan for healing her adrenals, but then she returns from her conventional practitioner saying, "My doctor doesn't believe in adrenal fatigue."

Just because conventional medicine doesn't have established protocols for testing and treating adrenal imbalance, doesn't mean it doesn't exist. We've seen this before with gluten sensitivity, which for many years was overlooked or dismissed by conventional practitioners unless the patient had blatant celiac disease symptoms. But gluten sensitivity is starting to be taken seriously — and I suspect that in time conventional medicine will start to recognize adrenal imbalance as well. The human body typically doesn't just arrive at a diseased state; there are pathways leading to it, with stations along the way. And in the case of Addison's and Cushing's, you may be able to halt the progression by identifying adrenal dysfunctions *before* they reach the crisis point. Let's take a closer look at these adrenal extremes, the gray zones between them, and how you can support your adrenal health and avoid a crisis.

Hans Selye's model of stress

In 1936, Dr. Hans Selye developed the **General Adaptation Syndrome** theory, identifying 3 universal stages of coping with stress:

- 1) Alarm.** At the first notion of stress, the body prepares for fight or flight, where energy is diverted from all functions that are secondary to immediate survival.
- 2) Resistance.** Since the body cannot sustain itself in crisis mode indefinitely, it enters a second stage when stress becomes more constant. The HPA (hypothalamus–pituitary–adrenal) axis undergoes adaptations so it can deliver a steadier stream of stress hormones.
- 3) Exhaustion.** If stress goes on for long enough, the body reaches this third stage, where it is depleted of its ability to respond to stress and begins to give out.

In a healthy system, counterbalancing hormones are released once a threat has passed, to signal your body to return to normal (*homeostasis*). Adrenal imbalance can develop in response to prolonged periods of stress.

Reference

Opposite ends of the adrenal spectrum

Even way back when I was a student, I found it difficult to simply accept a diagnosis and carry out the prescribed treatment plan without digging a little deeper. Instead of simply taking a disease at face value, I've always wondered, *How did this patient get there? And Could we have stopped the progression?* It's true that certain health issues beyond our control can cause Cushing's syndrome and Addison's disease, but I've learned that there are also many factors within our reach that influence them.

Cushing's syndrome (also called *hypercortisolism*) is caused by long-term exposure to high amounts of the stress hormone cortisol. A more comprehensive list of Cushing's symptoms can be found in the chart below, but patients with this disorder often acquire some distinct features: their faces are moon-like in shape, their bodies are very round in the middle, and they sometimes have a fatty hump at the back of their necks. Patients with Cushing's can also feel anxious, irritable, or depressed. In other words, this syndrome truly affects both the physical and the emotional. And most of what you'll read about the origins of Cushing's explains that it is generally caused by taking steroid hormones like *prednisone* (which is chemically similar to

human cortisol) for a long period of time. In other cases, there may be a tumor in the brain or the adrenal gland causing the increased cortisol release.

But there are other patients who are simply producing too much cortisol in their bodies. If we look at common complications of Cushing's — type 2 diabetes, obesity, poorly controlled blood sugar, high blood pressure, and metabolic syndrome — it's clear to me that there is a connection between diet and Cushing's. And it makes sense, because when blood sugar spikes (as it does with refined carbs and sugary foods), so does insulin, leading afterward to a dramatic drop in blood sugar. In this situation, the adrenal glands must pump out cortisol to mobilize glucose into the blood stream, so we can function. If this is happening over and over again, you can see how cortisol could be overproduced. Cortisol is produced in abundance when we're experiencing any kind of stress, so it may not be just an energetic crisis like what I've described above, but also psychological or emotional stress influencing your risk for hypercortisolism.

Conditions associated with a higher risk of adrenal insufficiency

- Hypothyroidism
- Type 1 diabetes
- Pernicious anemia
- Trauma (head trauma, surgical trauma, sports injury, bleeding)
- Pregnancy
- Infectious diseases (including tuberculosis and candidiasis)
- Coagulation disorders
- Liver disease
- Tumors (especially pituitary and adrenal tumors)
- Anxiety disorders and atypical depression
- Alcohol abuse

Reference

At the other end of the spectrum, **Addison's disease** (also called *hypocortisolism*) is a disorder where the adrenal glands don't produce enough cortisol and other glucocorticoids. There are several ways to get to this point as well. Most conventional practitioners will explain that Addison's is caused by either a lack of ACTH (*adrenocorticotropin*), which is the pituitary hormone that stimulates the adrenal glands to pulse out cortisol, or a localized problem, such as a tumor, surgery, or infection causing a breakdown in the messaging to release cortisol. There's also the possibility of the body's own immune system attacking the outer cortex of the adrenal glands (called *autoimmune adrenalitis*).

Yet, as you can see from the list to the right, several other common conditions can predispose us to adrenal insufficiency, like hypothyroidism, diabetes, and anxiety! And our on-the-go lifestyles don't help. Very few conventional practitioners in this country recognize *adrenal fatigue*, or the more serious *adrenal exhaustion*, which is basically "subclinical Addison's," the state bordering Addison's disease. But adrenal fatigue is something I see in my practice all the time. Adrenal fatigue expert Dr. James Wilson explains that there are four basic patterns leading to adrenal fatigue:

1) A prolonged period of resistance, finally giving way to adrenal fatigue.

You could say this is typical of "the stoic," who bears up to everything life has to throw at her but blows out her adrenals with a final life stressor — "the straw that broke the camel's back."

2) A single life blow, major or minor, followed by chronic, ongoing adrenal fatigue.

This pattern might be typical of those whose adrenal reserve was weak to begin with. You may have heard someone say, "Poor thing, she never got over x..."

3) Cycles of recurrent adrenal fatigue, with intermittent but partial recovery.

This is a characteristic pattern of those whose constitution is strong. They may give and give, but despite warning symptoms refuse to change. Such cycles can also result from forces of circumstance — "a series of unfortunate events."

4) Slow decline into adrenal dysfunction.

In this case, life's urgent stressors just grind down a person's resistance to stress gradually, to a point where they end up with subclinical Addison's.

The great news is that in all the above cases of adrenal fatigue, recovery is possible. I've helped many women through the process of healing adrenal imbalance. Yes, it takes some time and commitment. But not only can we prevent a much larger adrenal crisis from developing, every

aspect of your life will brighten up when your adrenals get the support they need. After all, these are the organs that help you deal with stress!

Signs and symptoms of adrenal dysfunction

You'll find a chart below listing some of the symptoms that come with various adrenal dysfunctions. Cushing's lies at one end of the spectrum and Addison's at the other. The two way-stations in between are not generally recognized by conventional medicine. Know that there is a wide range of scenarios and patterns in adrenal imbalance between the two extremes. If any of these signs and symptoms of adrenal dysfunction look familiar to you, you can read more about adrenal health on our website or schedule an appointment with a functional medicine practitioner.

Signs and symptoms of adrenal imbalance compared to healthy adrenal function

Cushing's

syndrome

(high cortisol)

Adrenaline dominance/cortisol

dominance

Normal!

Adrenal fatigue

(subclinical Addison's)

Addison's

disease

(low cortisol, aka

adrenal

insufficiency)

- Profound fatigue
- Weak muscles
- High blood pressure
- High blood sugar
- Increased thirst
- Frequent urination
- Irritability, anxiety, or depression
- A rounded face
- Fatty hump at back of neck/between the shoulders
- Upper body obesity
- Skin fragility and thinness, including easy bruising and stretch marks
- Increased hair in "unwanted" places
- Irregular periods
- Persistent anxiety
- Always on the go ("high adrenaline" lifestyle)
- Difficulty winding down to get to sleep
- Difficulty staying asleep
- Feeling "tired but wired"
- Abdominal weight gain
- Worsening PMS symptoms (irritability, anxiety)
- Panic attacks
- Easily fly off the handle
- "If you want anything done right, do it yourself!"
- "I can never do enough!"
- Wake refreshed from sleep
- Maintain energy levels throughout the day
- Pleasant tiredness toward evening, looking forward to turning in after a full day
- Ability to reframe, adapt and respond with flexibility to life stressors (and opportunities)
- Clear thinking, with steady productivity
- Good immunity to "what's going around"
- Healthy libido
- Minimal to nil cravings for salt, sugar, and
- Difficulty getting out of bed in the morning
- Nonrefreshing sleep

- Ongoing fatigue not relieved by sleep
- Weariness, lack of energy, lethargy
- Lightheadedness
- Increased cravings for salt
- Low libido
- Inability to handle everyday stress
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Longer recovery times from illness, injury, or trauma
- Mild depression
- Easily startled
- Mental foginess/fuzzy thinking
- Struggling to get through the day
- Frequent infections
- Start to feel better after an evening meal
- Chronic worsening fatigue
- Weak muscles
- Loss of appetite
- Weight loss
- Abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea
- Low blood pressure that drops further upon standing from a prone or seated position
- Cravings for salt
- Patches of dark skin, especially on scars, skin folds, elbows, knees, and knuckles
- Positive attitudes and beliefs

What conventional lab tests won't tell you

Conventional adrenal function tests

Cushing's is generally diagnosed by reviewing several lab tests, including:

- 24-hour urinary free cortisol level
- midnight plasma cortisol and
- late-night salivary cortisol measurements
- low-dose dexamethasone suppression test
- dexamethasone-CRH (corticotropin-releasing hormone) test

An Addison's diagnosis is confirmed with:

- ACTH-stimulation test
- CRH-stimulation test

Reference

Unless you visit your practitioner with classic Cushing's or Addison's symptoms, your adrenal function probably won't be tested. And if you are tested, be mindful of the fact that the conventional lab tests in the United States are set up to detect disease states. So a woman whose numbers don't fall at the extreme ends of the bell curve will be assumed normal, and the practitioner will likely move on to another possible diagnosis. What's troubling to me as a functional medicine practitioner, is that there are thousands of people who live their lives struggling with subclinical adrenal dysfunction and are unable to get any help.

If I suspect an adrenal imbalance or adrenal insufficiency in a patient, I measure cortisol levels at several points in a 24-hour cycle with a panel of saliva tests. We do this because cortisol output has a diurnal rhythm to it, where it is typically elevated in the morning to help us get moving, then slowly declines throughout the day to help us prepare for sleep. With this style of testing, I can often detect and address adrenal imbalance before a major problem has occurred. Blood pressure readings can also give us clues about adrenal insufficiency. If your blood pressure drops dramatically, with dizziness and lightheadedness when you stand up from a seated or lying-down position, this may be a sign that your adrenals are compromised. If more practitioners were mindful of the need to investigate variations in adrenal function instead of focusing on the extremes, I believe we'd see a much more vital, energetic, and stress-resilient population. Because your adrenal glands serve many crucial and secondary functions alike, healing adrenal imbalance can make a tremendous difference in your wholebody health, including your thyroid, libido, and ability to face whatever challenges and opportunities life may send your way.

The road to Addison's and Cushing's

What your practitioner may not tell you is that your adrenal health rests primarily on quality nutrition and lowering stress. This is an important aspect of our lives! I tell my patients that if we can address what they're eating and manage their stress, they *will* be on their way to happier, healthier lives. I promise.

Science tells us that cortisol is released in higher amounts when we are anxious or under stress, and this can be any kind of stress. Many women don't understand that diet is another form of stress in the body. If insulin and blood sugar are consistently on a rollercoaster because of highly refined carbohydrates and sugar, cortisol is responsible for leveling things out. After a while, the adrenals will tire of having to come to the rescue. Add emotional and psychological stress on to this and it only makes things worse. Over time

cortisol dominance to the eventual adrenal

You can make real changes in your life that support your adrenal glands before something goes wrong. Easy, natural steps you can take today include

herbs to support your adrenals.

On our way to adrenal awareness

I've been in practice a long time, and I'm slowly starting to see more and more endocrinologists pay attention to the adrenal glands. The author of a recent

article urged clinicians to become more aware of the "growing list

factors" that lead to adrenal insufficiency. It is my hope that in the near future, conventional medical circles will acknowledge the full adrenal spectrum, rather than two isolated conditions.

Let's face it: life is becoming increasingly stressful in terms of low

and less time to unwind and relax, so I'm seeing more and more adrenal imbalance in my

practice. It's time for us to slow down and take care of these tiny glands

bodies will thank us!

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