



Adrenal exhaustion

This little-known syndrome is the single biggest cause of ill health in the modern world, says naturopath Philip Weeks. Here he explores the symptoms and causes, and offers solutions.

"I'm feeling tired!" This is the phrase I hear more often in my clinic than any other. Adrenal exhaustion (also known as adrenal stress and adrenal fatigue) is a syndrome that goes largely unrecognized in the orthodox medical world but in reality it is one of the most common causes of feeling tired, strung out and basically like we are running on empty. It is also, in my opinion, the single most common factor underpinning long-term ill health.

In Chinese medicine, the energy of the adrenal glands is called the kidney *Qi*. It has been recognized since ancient times that the strength of this energy is the foundation of all health – and that the most common cause of its depletion is fear, overworking and overdoing it.

Symptoms of adrenal exhaustion

- An underlying feeling of fatigue and exhaustion
- Feeling tired upon waking, even after sufficient sleep
- Feeling most awake late in the evening
- Poor digestion, with a tendency to IBS

- Craving stimulants and sugary foods
- Poor recovery from exercise and illness
- Being easily overwhelmed
- Feeling on the edge or wired
- Blood sugar fluctuations
- Premature aging

There can also be other symptoms, which can be especially confusing, such as:

- Becoming ill as soon as you have a holiday or a few days off
- Erratic fluctuations in blood pressure
- A sudden feeling of anxiety or a sensation of palpitations when attempting to relax
- Feeling worse after exercise and taking many days to recover.

Stress makes you sick

The adrenal glands sit on top of the kidneys and they excrete hormones, such as adrenaline, noradrenaline, DHEA, testosterone and cortisol. When we are under any kind of physical, emotional or mental stress, the adrenals secrete hormones which cause the body to summon

the "fight or flight" response.

The body is designed to deal with very short bursts of stress. But today, many people have stress hormones circulating in elevated amounts on a near-constant basis. This soon begins to deplete the adrenals, and if it continues over a prolonged period, adrenal exhaustion is the result. What starts with a feeling of fatigue can, over time, be a leading factor in unstable blood pressure, digestive disorders, weight gain, immune depletion, cancer and heart disease – to name just a few.

The "pressure" can be physical, mental, emotional and even spiritual. The brain doesn't distinguish between them so the biochemical reaction within the body is the same. Whatever the cause, stress becomes a problem at the point where the demands placed on us are greater than the internal resources available.

As many of us today are dealing with everything from chemical pollution and electromagnetic radiation to poisoning from mercury fillings and vaccinations, to excessive working hours and not enough sleep, it's little wonder our bodies are struggling to cope.

Herbal healers for the adrenals

There are very powerful herbal medicines that maintain and help restore the adrenal glands. These are called “tonic” herbs. The scientific name is “adaptogen”, as they help the body adapt to stress, whatever the cause. Here’s a partial list:

- Ashwagandha
- Astragalus
- Fresh oat seed
- Gotu kola
- Liquorice
- Panax ginseng
- Reishi
- Rhodiola
- Schizandra berry
- Siberian ginseng

More and more research is being published about the effects of adaptogens and we are only just learning about the extent to which they impact immune, hormonal and cognitive functions. There are also medicines made from minerals, such as Shilajeet from the Himalayas. These are called rasayanas in Ayurvedic medicine (literally translated as “elixir of youth”!). However, they need to be made correctly and by hand and can take many months to prepare properly.

At my clinic we go to great lengths to make tonics based on ancient prescriptions from Ayurvedic, Chinese and the Arabic traditions. When prepared correctly, such preparations can bring about remarkable improvements in health.

Botanical Health (botanicalhealth.co.uk) manufactures a number of Philip’s herbal formulas, including the adrenal tonic ‘Ginseng and Liquorice’.

Mental patterns that contribute to internal stress include being a perfectionist, worrying about small details, excessive concern about other people’s opinions and not being able to embrace uncertainties.

The first symptom of overworked adrenals is tiredness. Most people react to tiredness by reaching for stimulants such as caffeine. This is actually the worst thing they could do! The journey to optimum health involves knowing, and respecting, your limits.

Watch out for feelings of being overwhelmed and make sure you get the support you need. Those who cope with stress best are those with an optimistic outlook. However, that doesn’t mean pretending that problems are not there with a veneer of feigned positivity. Working with a therapist or a therapeutic group can help identify unhealthy beliefs and give an opportunity to release blocked emotions.

Here are some more tips for stopping the stress and nourishing the adrenals back to health:

- You can greatly reduce your stress levels by quickly addressing any issues at work and at home. If something is bothering you, take action! Procrastinating can lead to feelings of frustration and low self esteem.
- Ditch the stimulants! Stimulants such as caffeine force the adrenals into action. They give you short-term energy which you pay for over the longer term. The same goes for a diet high in sugar, refined carbohydrates and processed foods.
- When you are under stress, the adrenals burn through B vitamins at a fantastic rate, so take a B-complex supplement every day. B12 is especially important in restoring adrenal function and is a common deficiency. Vitamin C is an important nutrient for the adrenals, too, and many raw fruits and vegetables are plentiful sources. Fats are needed to produce adrenal hormones, and easy obtainable sources are flax seeds, hemp seeds and avocado.
- Eat at the same time every day, to work with the body’s natural rhythms. There is a lot of focus on what we eat, but not enough on how and when we eat. Erratic eating habits disrupt digestion and play havoc with both adrenals and blood sugar levels.
- Reduce time in front of the TV or computer, especially at night, as it is stimulating and can affect the quality of your sleep.

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- Studies have shown that people who sleep less are more likely to suffer from diabetes, obesity and other chronic disorders. Most people function optimally on eight hours, although a lot of people are only able to get six. Make sure you get the amount that *you* individually need. Regularity of sleep routine can be just as important – going to bed and getting up at the same time.
- Learn to meditate. Methods which invoke deep relaxation will help to rest your adrenal glands. Some people are more suited to activities such as Yoga and Tai Chi.
- Alternative therapies have much to offer. Acupuncture and cranial osteopathy work directly on the nervous system and the adrenal glands. But anything that is relaxing is helpful, especially deep massage and body work.
- If you are a perfectionist...stop it! Spontaneous activities can help re-establish a new mindset. Acting, singing, group therapy and 5 rhythms dancing are all activities which may help.



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