

Adrenal Fatigue: What is it and why do I care?

The human body is continually bombarded with stressors in various forms, whether they are emotional (fear, anxiety) or physical (exercise or injury). And, both types of stressors have similar effects on the body, and the body will respond in a fairly predictable manner, i.e. stress hormones are secreted as the body attempts to cope with the stress, whether real (physical stress) or perceived (worry and anxiety).

This response is of course a good thing, and 'stress hormones' are vital as coping mechanisms. Without them, heart rate wouldn't increase as you run nor would you be able to mobilize stored energy from your cells, negating any exercise beyond a few minutes. This is only a sampling of the multiple actions these hormones do in the body.

The body's stress response is centered in the adrenal glands. These glands sit atop the kidneys and produce the hormones epinephrine (adrenalin), norepinephrine, and cortisol, among others. When an individual is suddenly stressed, the adrenal glands orchestrate the "fight or flight" mode, preparing the body to deal with the situation head on. The adrenal glands also respond to the ongoing, constant stress of our lives that occurs while driving, at work, training or during the multiple other stresses we encounter during the day (balancing work, family and training, for example!)

Typically, most people adapt well to the stresses of life. However, as we continually increase the demands we place on ourselves, our adrenal glands are constantly stimulated to produce stress hormones as our bodies' way of coping. As the stressors continue and less time is allowed for sleep and rest, 'adrenal fatigue' is often the result. Simply put, adrenal fatigue occurs when a person is unable to continue with their customary level of activity while exercising, at home or the office. This is marked by a continual deterioration of everyday functioning. Depression and decreased performance are hallmarks of adrenal fatigue.

Adrenal fatigue is caused by continual over stimulation of the adrenal glands from constant stress. Finally, the adrenal glands have difficulty keeping up the constant demand, and become limited in their ability to adapt to many stressors. This manifests as a number of symptoms, another of which is exhaustion that doesn't resolve with the typical rest and relaxation.

While the effects of adrenal fatigue on the body can be numerous, other key symptoms include difficulty sleeping, difficulty waking up in the morning and feeling unrested, decreased energy, fatigue, and increased injury and difficulty healing, to name a few. In fact, many symptoms of 'overtraining syndrome' are similar to that of adrenal fatigue.

Diagnosis of adrenal fatigue

Diagnosis of adrenal fatigue is typically not performed in a standard medical visit. In fact, adrenal fatigue may be a condition that many physicians simply don't know about, or commonly write off as an unimportant condition. Specific laboratory testing exists for diagnosing adrenal fatigue, along with a person's individual symptoms. For an accurate diagnosis to be made it is important to look beyond laboratory tests and symptoms alone; the entire picture needs to be examined. It is often the case when a person goes to their physician with a certain issue, and after a battery of tests, it is concluded that they are disease free, yet no real treatment is offered. If one is seeking diagnosis and treatment for adrenal fatigue, be sure to find a physician that is familiar with diagnosis and treatment.

Treatment of adrenal fatigue

Once adrenal fatigue is suspected, a number of effective treatments are available. The type and duration of treatment will vary from patient to patient, as each person's clinical symptoms and situation will differ. For the most part however, adrenal fatigue is typically treated using a combination of nutraceuticals (combination or specific nutrients), herbal medicines, and replacement hormones. Lifestyle adjustments may be initiated, again depending on the individual. In highly active athletes, sometimes a reduction in training for a period of time may be part of the treatment, while in sedentary people; light exercise may be part of the prescription.

Many physicians that practice nutritionally oriented medicine who treat adrenal fatigue often see an improvement in many other conditions. Some of the conditions that respond to treatment of adrenal fatigue include fatigue, frequent injury (bursitis, tendonitis), allergies, frequent illness, eczema & dermatitis and sleep disorders.

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