

Adrenal Fatigue

The 21st Century Stress Syndrome

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Adrenal fatigue affects an estimated 80% of people living in the industrialised countries, yet this debilitating health problem has been largely ignored by the medical community. Dr James L. Wilson coined the term 'Adrenal Fatigue' in 1998 to identify a group of signs and symptoms that people experience as a result of suboptimal adrenal function. The lack of optimal adrenal performance is often associated with the effects of long term stress on the endocrine system of the human body. 'Adrenal fatigue' (AF) is a label sometimes applied to a collection of non-specific medically unexplained symptoms, but it is not a medical condition recognised by the mainstream medical community.

The hectic lifestyle of the 21st century is taking its toll on health around the world. Rapid changing technology, cyberspace communication instead of human contact, multi-tasking with increasing demands and expectations at work, living life to the max and having very little time for reflection, rest and recuperation will eventually jeopardise one's natural energy reservoir. Our ability to deal with the constant changes of a modern high stress lifestyle will be greatly reduced, and 'Burning the candle at both ends' is a safe ticket to experience adrenal exhaustion and burnout further down the track. Frequent excessive cortisol production caused by a stressful lifestyle can affect mental and emotional development. Recent studies have shown that children who were exposed to frequent stress experienced short attention span, poor memory and persistent learning problems. This is not surprising as one of the long term impacts of chronically elevated cortisol levels is shrinkage of the hippocampus, a part of the brain involved in learning and short term memory consolidation.

In my practice, AF is one of the most common underlying causes for a number of other related health problems presented by my clients. The symptoms are often chronic and unresolved after the client has sought help from other alternative health care practitioners and general medical practitioners. The client is desperately looking for answers to their poor state of health and array of debilitating and persistent symptoms.

Higher and more prolonged levels of circulating cortisol due to chronic stress have been shown to have myriad negative effects, such as:

- Blood sugar imbalances such as hyperglycemia
- Diabetes: prolonged blood sugar imbalances can lead to insulin resistance. Excessive cortisol lowers the responsiveness of cells' insulin receptors (Langerhans cells) as well as the hunger-inducing hormone, leptin
- Impaired cognitive performance and poor memory
- Increased abdominal fat, which has a stronger correlation to certain health problems than the fat deposited in other areas of the body. Some of the health problems associated with increased abdominal fat are heart attacks, strokes, increased levels of bad LDL cholesterol



- Decreased bone density
- Decreased muscle mass and connective tissue
- Sleep disruption (insomnia)
- Mild depression: high cortisol has been shown to suppress the production of the neurotransmitter serotonin, the 'feel good' hormone
- Elevated blood pressure (hypertension)
- Lowered immune function
- Prone to immune mismatch responses (allergies)
- Slow wound healing

Chronically lower levels of circulating cortisol as in adrenal fatigue have been associated with negative effects, such as:

- Brain fog, cloudy-headedness
- Low thyroid function
- Blood sugar imbalances such as hypoglycaemia
- Fatigue: especially in the morning and mid-afternoon
- Sleep disruption
- Low blood pressure
- Lowered immune function
- Inflammation

In my practice, the percentage of clients presenting with adrenal fatigue issues has tripled over the last few years. These figures are proof that suboptimal adrenal function, referred to as mild adrenal insufficiency, hypo-adrenal or adrenal fatigue is extremely common these days. It is affecting people of all ages, backgrounds and social demographics compromising their quality of life in many ways. In order to understand how specialised kinesiology can assist the recovery process and help restore optimal function to the delicate endocrine system, let us examine the human physiology of the endocrine system first.

How Stress affects the Adrenal Glands

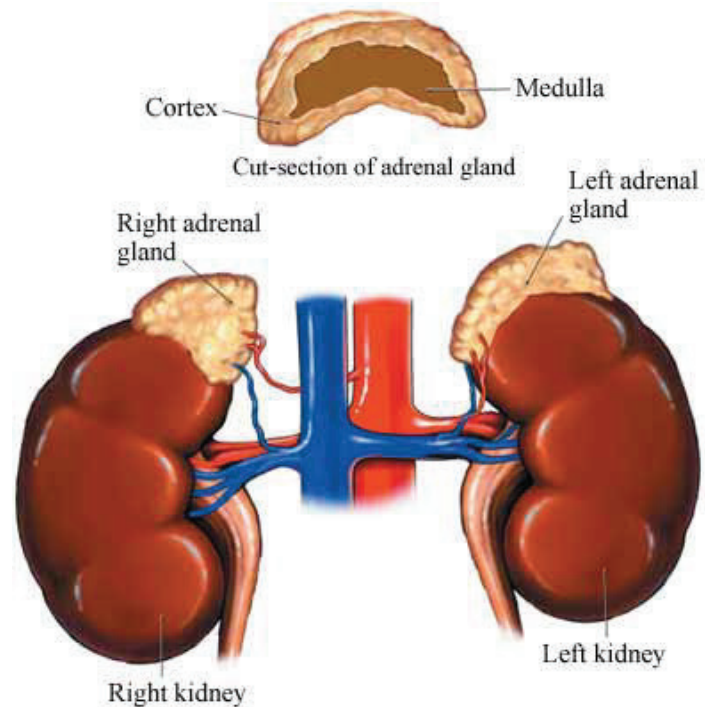
We recognise two kinds of stress. Hans Seyle has coined the terms Eustress (good stress) and Distress (bad stress)



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Prolonged unresolved distress is damaging and detrimental to our physical, emotional and mental wellbeing and ultimately to our longevity. Understanding our bodies' physiological response to perceived stressors in our daily lives will help you as a practitioner to work more efficiently with your clients and assist in their recovery. The two adrenal glands are endocrine glands involved with our innate Fight and Flight response. Their function is to help our physiology adapt to the stressors (real or imagined) triggered by our experiences in life. They are made up of two divisions: the outer cortex and the inner medulla. The cortex produces cortisol, a hormone that influences inflammation, wound healing, allergic reactions and a diverse spectrum of diseases ranging from lupus to asthma and arthritis. The medulla also releases a powerful hormone into our blood – adrenalin. This secretion has a direct and pervasive effect on our nervous system, more specifically the sympathetic nervous system. Adrenalin belongs to a group of chemicals called catecholamines, which have a profound effect on our sense of wellbeing and energy levels. The pharmaceutical industry produces drugs which mimic catecholamines and they are used to treat depression. However, these chemicals can not only remedy your low mood and energy levels and induce an artificial 'high' they can also dramatically increase your heart rate and make you sweat more. Whenever adrenal function is suboptimal, there is a tendency to develop hypoglycaemia, low blood pressure, low body temperature and a general feeling of exhaustion and uneasiness. Exercise becomes more difficult to sustain and endurance diminishes. In fact, adrenal exhaustion has been linked to chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) and immune dysfunction.

Anyone can experience adrenal fatigue at some time in his or her life. However, there are factors that increase your susceptibility to AF. These include a hectic lifestyle with poor diet, lack of sleep or relaxation, substance abuse, chronic illness, repeated infections or maternal adrenal fatigue during gestation. There are endless sources of stress we all experience on a daily basis. The question is why do some of us handle stress so much better than others? All of us are equipped at birth with the essentials for managing stress. Dr Georgia Witkin-Lanoil, author of the 'Female Stress Syndrome', believes that 'weak links' could be the cause. She identifies these weak links as 'vulnerable points' in our psyche and body, created by poor diet and lifestyle choices, accidents, childhood experiences and our genetic make-up. Each one of us has a natural stress tolerance, the ability to handle life's constant ups and downs and what we perceive as stressful, challenging, annoying or threatening. Someone might feel challenged by having to deal with constant deadlines at work, a toxic work environment and financial pressure, whereas your best friend finds it difficult to control their pubescent teenager or spouse's irrational spending habits.



Our individual stress tolerance depends on a number of factors:

- Does your 'Inner Critic' dictate everything you do and keep raising the bar?
- Is your 'Perfectionist' never satisfied with your achievements and constantly strives for more?
- Are your reactions triggered by unresolved fears from old references in the past?
- Low self-esteem: Am I good enough? Do I have to work harder and harder to please others?
- Genetic predisposition (maternal influences, AF during gestation)
- Your constitution (strong or weak)
- Current nutritional status
- Access to effective stress management techniques
- Support from family and friends and other support groups

Next Issue: Case studies and How to support adrenal function through balancing and lifestyle changes.

References

- Adrenal Fatigue, Dr James L. Wilson, ND, DC, PhD
The Female Stress Syndrome, Dr Georgia Witkin-Lanoil
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Hair Tissue Mineral Analysis seminar with InterClinical Laboratories
Resources: Adrenal Fatigue, Dr James L. Wilson, ND, DC, PhD (available from Equilibrium)
The Female Stress Syndrome, Dr Georgia Witkin-Lanoil

Website www.adrenalfatigue.org