



Help! What To Do About High Cortisol Levels

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The body's reaction to stress is called the "stress response". Without this finely tuned process, we would not be able to get through a day. However, our modern-day high-tech, fast-paced lifestyles have elevated stress to epidemic levels.

Our lives have become littered with psychological, physical, nutritional and environmental stressors, which in turn assault our body with chronic levels of stress hormones. Initially, there is some ebb and flow, but eventually, when stress becomes chronic, stress hormones are continually produced and released into the bloodstream.

- Do you wake up in the middle of the night or too early but you can't fall back to sleep?
- Do you get light headed upon standing and need caffeine to keep you awake?
- Do you feel "wired" yet "tired" at the same time?
- Do you crave carbs and possibly eat more than 50% of your calories after 5pm?
- Do you suffer from depression, anxiety, nervousness, irritability, weight gain, increased sugar cravings, increased blood pressure, and abnormal blood lipids?
- Do you have difficulty recovering from exercise, easily get musculoskeletal injuries and seem to get sick often?

If this describes some or all of your symptoms, you are likely experiencing the effects of stress and subsequent high cortisol levels.

Chronic stress and the resulting negative health issues is becoming a nationwide epidemic.

Stress can result from psychological, physiological and/or physical reasons. When under stress, the body responds by increasing cortisol output from the adrenal glands. Normal cortisol levels are not detrimental. In fact, cortisol is both beneficial and protective in controlling blood pressure, blood sugar levels, inflammation as well as strengthening cardiac muscle. A normal cortisol rhythm should peak in the morning hours and then steadily decline through the day with the lowest levels at night. When the body experiences chronic stress, over time these levels increase above optimal range.

An acute rise in cortisol is not a bad thing, as it is the natural adrenal response to stress, like when you get a common cold, or experience an isolated stressful event or during exercise. However, when stress becomes unresolved or chronic, cortisol is continuously elevated and the body enters what is known as the adrenal resistance phase.

Chronically elevated cortisol levels are both inflammatory and catabolic and cause a myriad of disorders including: thyroid and metabolic dysfunction, cognitive decline, low serotonin levels resulting in depression, irritability, anxiety, carb cravings, immune suppression, altered glucose metabolism, elevated lipid levels, increased blood pressure, low melatonin levels resulting in altered sleep patterns, musculoskeletal issues resulting in difficulty recovering from exercise and possible subsequent injuries. Cortisol levels are also related to mental acuity and can factor into degenerative diseases such as dementia and Alzheimer's.

DHEA, a precursor to sex hormones or more easily remembered as the "fountain of youth" hormone, also relates to adrenal function and unfortunately can have an inverse relationship to cortisol. Thus, if you have chronically elevated cortisol you may have proportionately low DHEA resulting in further metabolic disturbances including weight gain, poor immune function and hormonal imbalances.

Stress itself is unavoidable, yet you can take steps to manage your cortisol levels and limit metabolic disturbances. Whether your personal goals are weight reduction, improved health or sports performance, you hold the power to make changes to achieve your goals.

What To Do About High Cortisol Levels

The following nutrition, exercise and lifestyle recommendations can help you lower your cortisol to optimal levels.

Nutrition

A general rule in good nutrition is to focus on REAL food. Limit or avoid packaged, processed and non-organic foods. Additives, preservatives, GMOs, dyes, food colorings, hormones, pesticides, herbicides and antibiotics increase the toxic load to the liver and cause added stress to the body.

Cortisol causes gluconeogenesis, the production of sugar from non-carb sources. Thus, elevated cortisol increases your blood sugar levels. Eating a diet heavy in starchy processed carbohydrates and sugar further exacerbates elevated blood sugar leading to increased fat around the waist line as well as weight gain.

I recommend that those with elevated cortisol levels avoid sugar and reduce starchy carbohydrates.

- Non-starchy vegetables, specifically those in the cruciferous family, due to their detoxifying ability, should be consumed three times as much as fruits and ideally be included at each meal.
- Protein, an integral macronutrient for healing, should be included at every meal to help with stabilizing blood sugar and improving immune function. Aim for organic proteins to limit hormones, antibiotics and inflammatory fats that are often found in non-organic meats.
- Fats, more specifically omega-3 fatty acids, are anti-inflammatory and help counter the inflammatory effects of cortisol. Take omega 3 fish oils rich in EPA and DHA, and incorporate omega-3 rich foods like salmon and chia seeds into your daily diet.

- Water, appropriately labeled “the liquid of life”, is encouraged for those with elevated cortisol levels as it will help hydrate cells and detoxify the body. Limiting caffeine, as it is an adrenal stressor, is strongly recommended.

- Foundational supplements for optimal health include a good quality multi-vitamin, omega-3 fish oils and probiotics. Consult with a qualified practitioner for recommended supplementation to both support and restore adrenal function as well as decrease elevated cortisol.

Exercise

While exercise is recommended as one of the best forms of medicine, too much exercise at the wrong intensity level can be more inflammatory and further exacerbate cortisol levels in those that have already elevated values.

It is best to exercise when your cortisol is closest to normal range.

- Cortisol levels peaks about 40 minutes into exercise, therefore recommendations would be to limit cardiovascular activity to less than 40 minutes in duration and limit frequency to 2-3 times per week.

- As for resistance training, not only does frequency need to be reduced but so does intensity. I also recommend to increase rest times between sets and decrease both sets and rep range. Don't forget to include protein and l-glutamine post workout to aid with recovery, repair and resilience.

- Lastly implement recovery based exercise, such as walking, yoga, Pilates and stretching as these exercises help to regulate optimal cortisol output.

Lifestyle

Sleep is the most important thing when it comes to reducing cortisol and restoring the adrenal glands. Work towards 7-8 hours of uninterrupted sleep between 10pm and 6am. Turn off all artificial light. That means put the iPad, Kindle, laptop, iPhone and any other electronic devices away. No television either.

Artificial light tricks the body into releasing more cortisol, suppresses melatonin, making it difficult to sleep.

- Look to prayer, meditation, deep breathing and restorative type exercise such as yoga, Pilates and stretching to manage stress.

- Dry sauna several times a week has also shown to not only reduce toxins but decrease stress as well.

- Lastly massage has also shown to directly decrease cortisol while subsequently increasing serotonin and dopamine.

Know Your Cortisol Values

If you suspect you have chronically elevated cortisol levels, it is important to not only get your values tested via a 4-point salivary cortisol test, but to also consult with a qualified practitioner to ensure success on your healing journey.

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