

Adrenal Imbalances: The Connection Between Stress and Illness

Dr. Arjuna Veeravagu

Although most people have experienced feeling unwell during times of elevated stress, few are aware of the underlying connection between these experiences. Increased stress stimulates our adrenal glands to produce higher levels of the hormones cortisol, DHEA and adrenaline. After a stressful situation has been resolved, these hormones should soon return to normal levels. However sometimes this re-balancing does not occur which results in people maintaining either excessive or insufficient adrenal hormone levels for long periods of time. Both adrenal excess and insufficiency can lead to significant illness.

Triggers

One medical definition of the word stress is “a response by the body to a stimulus that disturbs or interferes with normal equilibrium.” From this definition, it is obvious there can be many different types of stress that trigger adrenal imbalances. Some major stressors are listed below:

- emotional imbalances
- insufficient sleep
- excessive sugar and carbohydrate intake
- shift work schedule
- frequent skipped or delayed meals
- severe infections
- overworking (mental or physical)
- surgery or traumatic injury
- excessive exercise (especially endurance)

Signs And Symptoms


There are also many different clinical presentations of adrenal imbalances, depending on the type of imbalance and one's overall state of health. Some of the more common signs, symptoms and associated conditions are listed below:

- fatigue
- chronic pain
- dizziness
- anxiety
- low thyroid function
- frequent infections
- sugar and/or salt cravings
- blood sugar imbalances
- depression
- difficulty sleeping
- low sex drive
- weight fluctuation
- low blood pressure
- autoimmune illnesses
- dry skin

Adrenal Support

Taking adrenal balancing (adaptogenic) herbs can make one's body more resilient during periods of elevated stress. The main herbs with adaptogenic activity are ashwaganda, cordyceps, rhodiola and licorice. In addition, the vitamins C and B5 are required by the adrenal glands to produce the stress-response hormones. There are also highly-specific adrenal balancing treatments that may be prescribed by a naturopathic physician once a patient's exact adrenal function is assessed.

Assessing Adrenal Function

Adrenal function can be accurately and conveniently assessed by naturopathic physicians using saliva testing for the adrenal hormones cortisol and DHEA. This test is called the Adrenal Stress Index (ASI) and entails the collection of four saliva samples during a typical 24 hour period to assess a patient's daily adrenal rhythm. Determining the exact adrenal rhythm is important, as adrenal excess and deficiency can mimic each other clinically and require different treatments. From this information an individualized adrenal-balancing treatment plan can be prescribed including diet recommendations, lifestyle counselling and nutritional and/or herbal supplementation. 

Seminar:

Dr. Veeravagu will be holding a seminar on Adrenal Imbalances on **Wednesday, September 26, 2007, 7:00-8:30pm** at the Canadian Memorial Centre for Peace, 1825 W. 16th Ave, Vancouver.

See event calendar for registration information.

References:

Wilson, James ND. Adrenal Fatigue, Smart Publications, Petaluma, CA, 2003.
Shames, Richard MD. Nutritional Management of Stress-Induced Dysfunction, Advanced Nutrition Publications, 2002.



Dr. Arjuna Veeravagu, ND RAC is a naturopathic physician, registered acupuncturist and founder of Sage Clinic in Yaletown. More information about Sage Clinic can be found at www.sageclinic.com. To schedule a consultation with Dr. Veeravagu please email info@sageclinic.com or call (604) 697-0397.