adrenal exhaustion

BY ROGER FRENCH

People suffering adrenal exhaustion or adrenal fatigue are not alone in this ‘illness’. It is a modern stress syndrome, and it is estimated that at least 80% of adults suffer some sort of adrenal fatigue. Other names include hypo-adrenia, non-Addison’s hypoadrenia and, in its most severe form, Addison’s disease. It is associated with overwork and high stress, and is the result of exhausted adrenal glands being unable to meet the demands for their hormones.

Un fortunately, orthodox medicine does not recognise adrenal exhaustion as a distinct ‘illness’, other than Addison’s disease. This can create frustration and further problems for sufferers.

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL CAUSES

Adrenal exhaustion may be caused by physical, emotional or psychological factors, including:

- lack of sleep, over-exertion, athletes training too hard;
- poor diet, high sugar intake, alcohol, caffeine, allergies, heavy metal toxicity, excessive copper levels, smoking, long-term use of cortisone;
- infections, other illnesses, Candidiasis, drugs, parasites;
- fear, marital stress, problems at work, death of a loved one, accidents, negative attitudes; and so on.

The adrenal glands sit on top of the kidneys and are responsible for the secretion of the hormones, adrenaline, cortisol, DHEA and others that are required for handling stress. Following prolonged stress, the adrenal glands can become exhausted and unable to produce adequate amounts of their hormones. Body and mind then become weak and vulnerable.

The adrenal glands secrete adrenaline when we need to meet, run a deadline, or give a presentation. They secrete cortisol to keep the body going under long periods of stress, inflammation or infection. If, however, the long periods of stress are not balanced by healthy food and plenty of rest and recuperation, the glands will be unable to fully maintain energy, organ function, immune function, and prevention of inflammation. The result can be a range of chronic health problems.

Each day, we consume a little adrenal energy and each night we restore our reserves. But if we consume more than we can restore, we eventually end up with adrenal gland exhaustion and chronic fatigue. Unfortunately, this is the reality for many people. Fortunately, the adrenals are quite resilient and can handle stress for extended periods of time. But eventually – perhaps after many years during which people think they are coping all right, yet are on the edge of burnout – the burnout arrives.

POSSIBLE SIGNS OF SYMPTOMS OF ADRENAL EXHAUSTION

Distressing ongoing fatigue, it’s an effort to get out of bed in the morning, lack of energy, everyday tasks are an effort, decreased sex drive, light-headedness on standing, low body temperature, low blood pressure;

- Cravings for sugar or salt, hypoglycaemia, weakened immunity – more frequent colds and flu, allergies, headaches, arthritis more severe, exacerbated symptoms during PMS and menopause;
- Decreased ability to handle stress, depression, poor memory, lack of mental alertness, poor sleep.

The sufferer of adrenal exhaustion might agree with the following:

- ‘I have forgotten how to laugh’
- ‘I have lost interest in most things’
- ‘The joy has gone out of my life’.

HORMONE HAVOC

- DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone) and cortisol are of greatest significance because they are continuously secreted during long-term chronic stress. Adrenaline and noradrenaline are more relevant with acute stress like anxiety or shortness of breath.
- Cortisol has many functions, including regulating heartbeat and controlling mood and behaviour. Cortisol levels tend to be high during the early stages of adrenal stress which can create havoc with sex hormones and cause low thyroid hormones, making us feel tired as metabolic rate falls. High levels are likely to produce muscle weakness, weight gain, fluid retention, decreased serotonin causing depression, decreased melatonin causing poor sleep, and frequent infections. Sugar cravings may also occur.
- DHEA levels is very important.
- In contrast, levels of DHEA (the most abundant steroid hormone in the body) tend to decline early during times of stress, and if this is not rectified, a whole range of other problems can develop including PMS and difficulties with menopause.
- The bottom line is that adrenal exhaustion can be devastating to overall hormone levels in the body. Unless remedied, the result may be numerous adverse health effects.

STAGES OF ADRENAL EXHAUSTION

There are three stages of adrenal exhaustion. During the first stage, there are high cortisol levels and low DHEA levels. The sufferer may still have some energy, but also some of the symptoms of high cortisol.

In stage 2, cortisol levels are now running low but have not yet run out, and the person feels tired and stressed.

In stage 3, cortisol and DHEA levels are very low, resulting in low energy levels, dark circles under the eyes, and the other symptoms of full-blown adrenal exhaustion.
TREATING ADRENAL EXHAUSTION

- First and foremost, the person needs
  - abundant rest and sleep. Sleep should be regular and preferably about eight hours a night. Also practise stress management, especially meditation. The interview with Yogi Brahm in this issue (p.32) could hardly be more relevant for dealing with exactly this need. This is a time for self-nurturing and self-love to aid the healing process.
- Diet. To avoid the dietary causes of adrenal exhaustion and to minimise stress on the adrenal glands, follow Natural Health Dietary Guidelines.
  - Especially select low-glycaemic-index foods, eaten in smaller amounts. Sugar and refined carbohydrates bump up blood sugar levels and stress the adrenal glands. It may help to take supplements of vitamin-B complex, vitamin C, magnesium and zinc.
  - Drink one or two litres of pure water every day.
  - It is critical to avoid caffeine, alcohol and drugs that flog the nerves and produce nerve exhaustion. If you do drink them, reduce their effects by drinking an additional equal amount of pure water.
- Hormone restoration. Under professional supervision, supplementation with bio-identical adrenal hormones may restore optimal hormone levels.
- Herbs. Herbs can be extremely helpful with adrenal exhaustion. Always have professional guidance when taking herbs. Some helpful herbs are:
  - Liquorice root contains glycyrrhizin which raises levels of cortisol and is an adrenal stimulant. Take liquorice for no more than eight weeks or you may raise cortisol levels too high.
  - Asian ginseng can improve adrenal function and may bring an increase in energy. It also softens the impact of stress on the body.
  - Echinacea, well known for stimulating immunity, may also stimulate adrenal function.
  - Astragalus. Traditional Chinese Medicine relies heavily on the balancing action of this herb. It stimulate the immune system and balances bodily functions.
- Traditional Chinese Medicine, homeopathy or acupuncture could be helpful with an experienced and qualified practitioner.
- Yoga is excellent for relaxation, but it is important to avoid strenuous yoga postures that can stimulate the adrenal glands – especially standing postures and unsupported backbends. To help calm the mind, practise yoga in a warm, darkish, quiet room.
- Regular physical activity. Most of us don’t exercise nearly as much as our bodies are designed for. We certainly aren’t designed to sit at a desk or in a chair for most of our time. Just walking briskly for half an hour daily, six days a week, can make all the difference.
  - Physical activity increases the circulation which helps restore energy. Make the sessions more enjoyable by doing them with a good friend and having a good talk as you go.
  - Fit in some fun and laughter. Make it a priority to have a little fun each day. You might even become more productive at work – and better company too. If you can find things that make you laugh, this can do wonders for that depression and fatigue. As the saying goes, ‘laughter is the best medicine’.

Put number 1 first. Realise that you must look after yourself first, nobody else can. If you don’t, you will still be sick and of no use to anyone. Learn to say ‘no’ to excessive demands on your time and energy, and to say ‘no’ without guilt. This might be a little difficult at first if you’re someone who’s keen to please other people. However, it’s you and only you who can change things.

Don’t put it off, do it now. Whether it’s something difficult or something you just haven’t got around to doing, take the bull by the horns and do it now. Life is literally a ‘once in a lifetime opportunity’, so don’t waste it by worrying about things you know you have to do, or omitting to do the things you really want to do.

Don’t be too hard on yourself. Accept that you are going to make mistakes at times – after all, the only people who never make mistakes are those who never do anything! And don’t be too hard on yourself for your perceived ‘imperfections’. If you do find yourself doing something that you know is counterproductive, don’t feel guilty – simply correct yourself and get back on track. Guilt is one of the very damaging emotions. If you haven’t hurt anybody else, why feel guilty and compound the problem?

The stress avoidance formula. Keep in mind at all times the stress avoidance formula:

- Worry about those things that you can do something about – and do it – and forget all the rest.
- Don’t put it off, do it now.
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