

Stress Less And Lose Weight !

By Narelle Stegehuis ND

Did you realise that stress can lead to weight gain, not to mention a minefield of other problems? Naturopath Narelle Stegehuis explores the little understood condition of adrenal burnout.

Do you remember how you used to feel? You were happy and well with steady energy and emotions. You slept soundly and woke up feeling rested. Your recovery from illness was fast. You maintained a healthy weight without dieting. Now your energy lags during the day, you feel emotionally unbalanced and you sleep poorly. You can't lose excess weight even while dieting. You use caffeine or carbohydrates as pick-me-ups. The message is clear - your adrenals need help!

Everyone experiences mood variations - grumpiness, anxiety, or feelings of dejection. But adrenal imbalance creates havoc with moods.

One thing that won't rescue your mood is simply putting on a happy face and trying to will yourself into happiness. In fact, you may drive your darker feelings underground, re-emerging later as anxiety, anger, depression, or stress-related illness.

Life stages contribute greatly to stress levels. In our 20s and 30s, we are focused on career, starting a family and juggling financial burdens. In our 40s, life throws us the wild cards of ageing parents, relationship separations, career changes and challenges and, of course, raising children. It is little wonder by the time we reach our 50s dealing with loss for one sort or another, and children leaving home - we start to feel tired, frumpy and burnt out!

It is important to understand how stress affects our adrenals and ultimately our health. Adrenal Hypersensitivity simply means our adrenals have been, and perhaps still are, working overtime. Unlike our ancestors, we live with constant stress. Instead of occasional demands followed by rest, we're constantly overworked, exposed to environmental toxins and worrying about others - with no let-up. The effects of adrenal hypersensitivity can be profound.

It is important to change the way we think about our health. We can't just slap bandaids over your aches and pains, mood changes or ill health. This approach only leads to future health issues.

Ask yourself if you experience any of the following?

- Suppression of the immune system - always getting colds and flus?
- Fatigue and weakness
- Stubborn weight especially around your tummy and lower body?
- Moodiness, anxiety or depression
- Hormonal imbalance- irregular periods, skin problems or hair loss?
- Muscle and bone loss
- Autoimmune disorders
- Heightened menopausal symptoms - hot flashes

Unfortunately, modern living can steal your sleep, slow your metabolism even harm your personal relationships. Every challenge to your mind and body creates a demand on your adrenal glands. The list of challenges is endless: lack of sleep, a demanding boss, the threat of losing your job, financial pressures, personality conflicts, yo-yo dieting, relationship turmoil, death or illness of a loved one, skipping meals, reliance on stimulants like caffeine and carbs, digestive problems, over-exercise, illness or infection, unresolved emotional issues from your past or present.

Your adrenal glands provide you with crucial hormonal support needed to get through the day with energy, enthusiasm and efficiency. Adrenal hypersensitivity means you are much more likely to suffer from fatigue, forgetfulness, mood swings and sleep disturbances. Living in the "fast" world of today exposes you to unavoidable levels of stress - and with that stress comes elevated cortisol levels.

When functioning normally, cortisol helps you meet these challenges by converting proteins into energy, releasing glycogen and counteracting inflammation. For a short time, that's okay. But at sustained high levels, cortisol gradually tears your body down.

Sustained high cortisol has a range of insidious effects. It destroys healthy muscle and bone; slows down healing and normal cell replacement; co-opts biochemicals needed to make other vital hormones; impairs digestion, metabolism and mental function; weakens your immune system; and interferes with healthy endocrine function contributing to conditions such as heightened menopause, poor fertility, thyroid imbalance and ovarian imbalances such as PCOS, fibroids and endometriosis. The fact that we have heard of so many of these conditions - and maybe even suffer some of them ourselves - indicates the prevalence of high cortisol levels in our super-stressed world.

In our 20s to 40s, stress can interfere with our menstrual cycle.

Many women consider PMS to be just part of life, as it affects an estimated 75 per cent of menstruating women. For some, this "time of the month" actually rules their lives - and the lives of their partners and families. Others are unaware that they might be experiencing it. Despite its prevalence and the awful symptoms this syndrome can bring, traditional medicine falls far short of providing successful remedies.

Contributing factors to PMS are ovarian imbalances such as Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome or PCOS, fibroids, cysts, endometriosis or oestrogen dominance. And yes, such conditions are all influenced by stress.

Some symptoms to look for are:

- Lowly moods or mood shifts
- Weight gain and fluctuations
- Anxiety or tension
- Feeling "out of control"
- Irritability, anger
- Lowered libido
- Concentration difficulties
- Lethargy, general loss of energy
- Appetite change, food cravings
- Sleep problems (too little or too much)
- Physical symptoms (bloating, breast tenderness, pain)

Your adrenals can even change your body shape! If you have been under stress, it is most likely that you have gained weight and experienced a change in your body shape. You may also have noticed your waistline thickening. One of the underlying reasons for this change, particularly in your 40s, is that women in their midlife period experience a slowdown in metabolic rate of about 10-15 per cent compared to when they were younger. Your body also becomes more efficient at taking energy into your cells and storing it in the form of fat. In addition, as oestrogen levels fall, your appetite increases!

To make things even harder, by the time you hit menopause your adrenal glands have had it! Absolutely hit the wall! Let's face it - you have heard it all, seen it all and experienced levels of stress you never thought possible - and survived. But through all this, your adrenals have taken a hiding.

So what's the concern? Your adrenal glands are important in the long-term maintenance of your hormone levels. They increase production of androstenedione (the precursor to oestrogen and testosterone) and progesterone. Therefore, the systematic functioning of your adrenal glands is important.

One of the main ways you can support your adrenal glands is by ensuring your diet is completely meeting your body's needs. Which brings us to that persistent and depressing - Tummy Bulge!

One of cortisol's many functions is that it stimulates the release of glucose, fats and amino acids for energy production. It will also keep your appetite stimulated. In addition, the type of fat that accumulates because of this stress-induced appetite will typically locate itself in the abdominal region of your body. Stress contributes to weight gain primarily because of an excess secretion of the key stress hormone cortisol, along with a reduced secretion of the key hormone Dehydroepiandrosterone, or DHEA. DHEA is a steroid hormone synthesised from cholesterol and secreted by your adrenal glands.

Adrenal hypersensitivity is often a critical factor in many related conditions including:

- Polycystic ovaries (PCOS)
- Lowered thyroid function
- Fibromyalgia
- Chronic fatigue syndrome
- Arthritis
- Premature menopause
- Impaired fertility

It's time to value your health

Many of us tend to regard stress as a normal part of life we simply have to deal with as well as we can. It is important to learn how to incorporate stress management, exercise, nutrition and dietary supplements into a realistic approach to controlling cortisol levels.

I am certain that once you gain insight into the relationship between modern stressors, your cortisol level and its effects on your long-term health, you will be motivated to get your cortisol levels under control.

Often over time we lose interest in food. It becomes "just another thing to do". Reassess your relationship with it. Try not to worry about food, or feel guilty about what you've eaten or what you are planning to eat.

It is important to adopt and achieve a diet that supports your lifestyle - one that doesn't eliminate food groups but focuses on a formula that works for you! It should foster a passion in you to cook and take pleasure in food - choose flavoursome meals that are spirited and nourishing.

Dietary changes such as reducing MSG, excess sugars and cola drinks can greatly improve adrenal performance. Even the reduction of coffee and alcohol can substantially assist with a symptom like anxiety.

Targeted nutrients prescribed by a practitioner, along with dietary changes can do wonders. Herbs such as Winter cherry, Licorice and Ginseng and the amino acid Tyrosine, along with Vitamins B5 and B6, are well documented to support healthy adrenal function.

Remember, your health reflects the way you live - so isn't it time you started making some healthy changes?

Narelle Stegehuis, CEO of MassAttack, is a practicing Naturopath specializing in natural treatment programs for women with hormonal imbalance, such as PCOS, Fibroids, Endometriosis & Thyroid imbalance. Uniquely for patient convenience her programs are also offered via the Internet. She is both an accomplished writer and recent recipient of the Australian Naturopathic Excellence Award 2006. Visit the MassAttack website at www.massattack.com.au

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