

IT'S NOT HIM

It's your hormones

TIRED, SNAPPY, DON'T WANT YOUR MAN TO TOUCH YOU? CHANCES ARE YOU'RE BLAMING YOUR HORMONES – BUT ARE YOU BLAMING THE RIGHT ONES, ASKS HELEN FOSTER

THE adrenals are tiny triangle-shaped glands at the top of the kidneys. About 2.5cm high, they don't look like they could do much damage, but as controllers of the chemicals that give us energy and drive, if they are under pressure the health ramifications are huge.

"I see people with lowered immunity, fatigue, mood swings, weight gain and low libido, all associated with adrenal issues – I'd say eight out of 10 of the women I see have some kind of adrenal problem," says naturopath Narelle Stegehuis, director of MassAttack, specialists in women's health and hormones (www.massattack.com.au).

The problem is stressful lifestyles and stimulants such as caffeine, alcohol and nicotine cause the glands to pretty much constantly pump out hormones and chemicals like adrenaline.

"This isn't how the body is meant to behave," says naturopath Cheryl Penna from Melbourne's Urban Sense Wellness Clinic (www.urbansense.com.au). "The stress response is supposed to last a few minutes at a time, then we're supposed to retreat and calm down."

This isn't happening, though, and the result is that our adrenal glands are burning out. When this happens, they simply can't produce the hormones and other chemicals we need for our body to function effectively. Hit particularly hard are energy levels and motivation, but the adrenals also influence levels of mood chemicals like GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid) and dopamine, and sex-drive hormones like testosterone.

So how do you know if it's happening to you? Suffering the aforementioned symptoms can give you some clues. "Plus, even though you'll be tired all the time, a lot of sufferers often get a sudden surge of energy about 11pm, which happens in no other fatigue-related condition," says Dr James L Wilson, author of *Adrenal Fatigue: The 21st Century Stress Syndrome* (Smart Publications, \$23.95). The best thing to do if you suspect something is ask a naturopath for a cortisol check.

Normally this stress hormone rises in the morning and falls throughout the day. "But this changes if someone has adrenal problems," says Penna. "It will either rise throughout the whole day or totally flatline, never peaking at all." The test is easy: spit into a vial four times a day and send off for analysis.

The good news is the adrenals will restart again – although it's not an overnight process. "It takes a long time to burn out the adrenals and it takes a long time to pep them up again," says Dr Julie Bradford from Toowoomba's Bradford Cosmedical (www.drjulie.com.au). In fact, it can take six months or more to feel totally normal again.

These tips will help speed things up – or, if you're in the early stages of the process, may stop serious issues developing...

1. Tackle stress

"If you keep overloading the adrenals, they won't recover," says Penna. "You have to deal with the lifestyle factors that are causing them to become overstimulated."

2. Relax properly

"Too much of what we think is relaxing activity still stimulates the adrenals," says Wilson. "Watching exciting TV shows, for example, will still switch them on." Take a little time each day to simply sit in peace or have a bath.

3. Swap your morning coffee for licorice tea

As well as fighting stress, cut down on stimulants such as caffeine or nicotine, which overstress the adrenals. "Licorice, however, is an adrenal balancer and many coffee drinkers find they like the taste," says Penna. Try licorice tea from health stores, or ask a naturopath for licorice extract and add 2ml to hot water. Always consult your doctor first.

4. Up your vitamin C

The adrenals use twice as much of this as any organ in the body. Increase your intake of berries, citrus fruit and capsicums. B vitamins, found in wholegrains, are also adrenal boosters.

5. Eat little and often

Seesawing blood sugar levels and skipped meals act as adrenal "stressors". "They cause them to produce cortisol," says Penna. Ideally, eat a small meal or snack every two to three hours.

6. Try an adaptogen

This includes herbs such as ginseng, rhodiola and withania (ashwagandha), known to help control the body's stress response and powerful at balancing the adrenals. "Some people may find it helpful to use adaptogen herbs in the morning, then calming plants like lavender at night," says Stegehuis.



'I SUFFERED IN SILENCE'

WRITER Fiona Nelligan shares her story of adrenal burnout...

Developing a recurring cyst on my thyroid in addition to polycystic ovarian syndrome had me at the end of my tether, emotionally and physically. So when an email came through from MassAttack on the day I asked the health editor if she knew any good naturopaths, it seemed like a sign. After examining the questionnaire I'd filled out, Narelle Stegehuis diagnosed adrenal burnout and hormone imbalances. Reading my profile, I was almost in tears: finally, someone understood!

Food tables were easy to understand: red (avoid), yellow (eat in smaller quantities) and green (go for your life). Coffee was a no-no (eek), as were broccoli, spinach and soy products for their effect on thyroid function – all of which had featured heavily in my diet. Nutrients were prescribed to help

detox, support the nervous system and tackle cravings; omega-3, omega-6 and vitamin E capsules delivered essential fatty acids; plus a customised dark brown herbal tonic which tasted disgusting so must have been good for me.

The program encourages you to reevaluate eating habits, helped by the cookbooks written by Narelle. I choose organic whenever possible. I try to snack sensibly (Kitz dehydrated crackers and nuts are fantastic). You can follow your progress online with food diaries and a messaging system to raise any problems or questions with the team.

While I didn't lose weight, I did feel lighter, brighter and energised. Comments were gratefully received about my glowing skin.

After a time off the supplements due to an operation and moving house, I noticed the difference and have now re-ordered everything (including snacks).