

Is Stress Turning You into A Wired, Tired, Pot-Bellied Zombie?

by Janine Fahri, BSc (Hons) BANT CNHC

We are no strangers to stress in today's frenetic society – traffic jams, train delays, deadlines, meetings, unemployment, difficult relationships, demanding children, ageing parents, school holidays, the rising cost of living, and financial worries. Does it ever stop?! Throw in a poor diet, sleep deprivation and insufficient downtime, and it's only a matter of 'when' before you develop adrenal fatigue in some form.

What is adrenal fatigue?

Adrenal fatigue *syndrome* is a group of signs and symptoms that typically results from intense or prolonged stress, but it can also develop in response to acute or chronic illness. As the name suggests, the main symptom is fatigue, which is not relieved by sleep. There are, however, other associated complaints:

- Allergies
- Apathy
- Anxiety
- Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS)
- Depression
- Frequent colds & flu
- Headaches
- Infertility
- Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBS)
- Inflammatory conditions
- Insomnia
- Irritability
- Low energy
- Low libido
- Menstrual difficulties
- Migraines
- Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS)
- Recurrent infections
- Skin complaints
- Sleep disorders
- Weakened immune system
- Weight problems

The thing about adrenal fatigue is that its onset is insidious; it can sneak up on you. You can function – initially at least, with no obvious sign of physical illness, yet it is always with an underlying general malaise. You just don't feel right. Compromised adrenal function can often force you to rely on coffee, cola, chocolate and other stimulants to get going in the morning and keep you going throughout the day. These 'props', however, may help you to cope in the short-term, but the adrenal glands can be so over-stimulated that eventually they pack up – think of a pump running dry in a busy petrol station. This is known as 'adrenal exhaustion' whereby getting out of bed for more than a few hours can prove difficult.

Stress and your body: The science bit

The adrenal glands sit just above your kidneys and are responsible for all your responses to stress, whether physical, emotional or psychological. They produce adrenalin, cortisol and dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA) – collectively known as 'stress hormones'.

Cortisol is the main stress hormone and production fluctuates over the course of a day in tandem with your natural circadian rhythm. Levels are usually at their lowest between midnight and 4 am, and they then gradually increase until around 8 am in time for you to wake up and start the day.

After 8 am, cortisol levels start to decline incrementally throughout the day to help prepare you for sleep.

Cortisol can be both friend and foe. In 'friend' mode, it mobilises fat and carbohydrate for instant energy, it maintains steady blood-sugar levels while we sleep, and it helps us to wake up in the morning. In a nutshell, cortisol is the body's Mr Motivator – it keeps you wide-awake and on your toes, and it empowers you to be ultra-productive.

Still, you can have too much of a good thing, and when this friendly hormone is over-produced, it turns rogue and robs you of sleep, leaving you feeling tired but wired. Excess cortisol can also adversely affect:

- Ageing
- Bone and muscle tissue
- Cardiovascular function
- Glucose regulation
- Immune defence (reduced SIgA)
- Sleep
- Thyroid function
- Weight control

Cortisol output by your adrenal glands is one of the most reliable indicators of your adrenal function, and how well your body is coping with stress. DHEA, however, is another important stress hormone and responsible for a number of functions within the body, including immunity, energy production and protection from age-related degenerative conditions. Imbalanced DHEA has been associated with:

- Alzheimer's disease
- Cancer
- Cardiovascular disease
- Depression
- Impaired immunity
- Insulin resistance
- Obesity
- Panic disorder

Do I need to get my stress hormones tested?

With over 20 years of clinical experience, Integrated Medical Practitioner Janine Fahri devised the *NutriLife Adrenal Stress Questionnaire*, which is to be used as a preliminary guide as to whether you have any stress hormone imbalances.

Grab a pen and tick all those statements that apply to you...

- | | |
|--|--------------------------|
| I often feel tired for no apparent reason | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have endured a lot of stress over an extended period of time | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I frequently feel drained, run down and/or overwhelmed | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I don't wake refreshed even when I go to bed reasonably early | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I suffer from insomnia or with sleep difficulties | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I often wake up in the middle of the night and can't get back to sleep | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I need a coffee to 'kick-start' me in the morning | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I regularly skip meals e.g. breakfast | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I often crave sugary and/or salty foods | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I usually feel my best after 6pm in the evening | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I suffer from allergies e.g. food, pollen and/or chemicals | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I carry excess weight, especially around my stomach | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I frequently suffer from colds and flu | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I can take a long time to recover from colds and flu | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have been trying to conceive a baby with no success | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I often feel emotional, tearful or irritable | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I am finding it increasingly more difficult to cope with stress | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I have suffered with long-term illness | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I am frequently low in mood, apathetic and/or fed up | <input type="checkbox"/> |

If you ticked 3+ statements, it is highly recommended that you test your stress hormone levels.

How are stress hormone levels tested?

Your levels of the stress hormones – cortisol and DHEA – can be determined via a simple saliva test carried out in the comfort of your own home. See '*What does the test actually involve?*' for full details. The laboratory's 'comprehensive' version of this test also measures Secretory IgA, an antibody that plays a critical role in your body's immune system.

Can I ask my doctor for this test?

Your doctor/GP can order a standard blood test for adrenal function, but unfortunately this doesn't highlight anything more than the most severe cases of adrenal dysfunction, such as Addison's disease or Cushing's syndrome. Conversely, the *salivary* adrenal stress test is a specialist functional laboratory assay that provides a more representative assessment of your cortisol levels throughout the course of a day. Furthermore, there is substantial scientific evidence indicating that stress hormones are measured more accurately in saliva than by taking a blood sample, which is especially good news for those scared of needles.

What does the test actually involve?

Full instructions will be included with your test kit, but here's a step-by-step guide to what taking the test involves. Firstly, upon receipt of your test kit, store the enclosed gel pack in your freezer until you are ready to return your samples to the laboratory. Decide on a day that will typically represent your stress levels, such as a working day. Collect a total of four samples (approximately half a teaspoon of saliva each time) at 4 to 5-hour intervals throughout the course of one day. For example:

Sample #1: 8am

Sample #2: 1pm

Sample #3: 6pm

Sample #4: 10pm

Once you have collected all your saliva samples, freeze the test tubes for at least 2 hours and keep them frozen until ready for dispatch. Put the samples in the mailbag provided, together with the pre-frozen gel pack, and return to the laboratory for analysis. Simple!

Your test results are usually available within 2 weeks.

NB. Certain medications can influence the levels of stress hormones reported in this test. For example, any steroid-based nasal sprays, inhalers, or eye drops; Clomiphene; Cortisone cream or patches; Ketoconazole; Oral steroids (e.g. Prednisone) and Phenytoin. **Please mention any existing medical condition or medication when ordering your test kit.**

I've done the test and yes, my stress hormones are imbalanced. Now what?

Here's the good news straight away – there is A LOT that can be done to help you re-balance your stress hormones. Indeed, this is where integrated medicine really comes into its own.

Learning HOW, WHAT and WHEN to eat, for example, makes a massive difference to the health of your adrenal glands, as well as your overall wellbeing. Furthermore, the right nutrition combined with lifestyle adjustments and specialist dietary supplements (e.g. glandular extracts, adaptogenic herbs and specific nutrients) can help to rebalance your adrenal health entirely.

If you're diligent, you should expect to feel an improvement in your symptoms in as little as a week and depending on the severity of your stress-hormone imbalance, your adrenal health could be fully optimised within 3-6 months.

Janine Fahri

The Life & Soul Doctor



Janine Fahri, The Life & Soul Doctor, and Founder of NutriLife Clinic is a leading medical practitioner integrating nutritional therapy, psychology, and cutting-edge healing techniques.

Adopting a practical and caring approach, Janine devises personalised treatment programmes. She also presents health-related seminars and workshops to the public and corporate sector worldwide.

Highly trained with over 20 years clinical experience, Janine works alongside consultant neurosurgeons in London's Harley Street, and she lectures on specialised subjects including inflammation, digestive dysfunction, and drug-nutrient interactions. Janine has gained an excellent reputation with Europe's eminent medical consultants, and mutual referrals ensure a collaborative approach to patient care.

Frequently quoted in the media as an authority on interventions for health, Janine regularly contributes to leading publications, including The Times, Telegraph, Runner's World, Men's Health, Red, and Marie Claire. She is also the Resident Nutritional & Lifestyle Expert for the Daily Mail and ELLE magazine.

Janine Fahri is an accredited member of the British Association for Nutrition & Lifestyle Medicine (BANT), which governs industry standards. She is registered with the Complementary & Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC), and a Senior Associate Member of the Royal Society of Medicine.

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