

Cortisol: A Holistic, Balancing Guide

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What is cortisol?

Cortisol is a key **stress hormone** produced by your adrenal glands. It's directly linked to the **sympathetic nervous system**: your body's 'survival mode'. Cortisol rises when your body senses threat/unsafety, pushing you into fight, flight, freeze or fawn.

But in a world shaped by **capitalism, urgency culture, emotional suppression, trauma & disconnection**, many of us are stuck in that survival state long-term (as opposed to rare, intermittent spikes of unsafety).

This is especially true for those carrying the imprint of **complex trauma** - a layered history of stressors like childhood neglect, systemic oppression, emotional wounding or unsafe relationships (among other things). These histories train our bodies to stay on high alert, even when we want to rest.

So, our cortisol **remains elevated** over time, which can disrupt almost every system in the body and lead to a cascade of **symptoms**, including:

- Anxiety, panic, irritability
- Sleep issues (especially waking between 3-4am)
- Gut imbalance, bloating, constipation (IBS stuff)
- Puffy face, joint inflammation or skin issues
- Hormonal imbalance & irregular cycles
- Cravings for sugar, salt or caffeine
- Burnout, fatigue, low libido
- Difficulty resting, focusing or regulating moods
- Weight gain/fluctuation, especially around the belly

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The good news? You can support your body to *come home to safety*. Balancing cortisol isn't about "doing more" - it's about re-learning how to soften, reconnect and *listen*.

Morning Practices to Regulate Cortisol

- **Gentle, screen-free wake-up routine:** Let your body *arrive* into the day without overstimulation. Your phone holds the world at your fingertips - and you weren't designed to see all that upon waking.
- **Sunlight within 30 minutes of waking:** 10-15 minutes of natural light helps regulate your circadian rhythm, which governs cortisol and melatonin levels.
- **No caffeine or alcohol (especially on an empty stomach)** - Both spike cortisol. Wait at least 90 mins after waking and pair with protein or healthy fats.
- **Eat within 60 mins of waking** - Even if small (half a banana, papaya, or a boiled egg), this signals safety to your system.
- **Blood sugar balancing:** Eat regular, nourishing meals with protein, fibre and healthy fats. Avoid skipping meals. See Blood Sugar worksheet (if applicable).
- **Cycle syncing:** Aligning food, rest and movement with your menstrual cycle (if you have one) can reduce internal stress. See Cycle Syncing resource.

Nervous System Practices

- **Vagus nerve toning** - gentle humming, gargling, vagus nerve massages etc.
- **Daily presence/breathing** - Even 60 seconds of conscious breathing activates your parasympathetic nervous system. Try box breathing (4-4-4-4) or 4-7-8 breath.
- **EFT tapping** - A powerful technique to soothe stress.

- **6Hz binaural beats** - Encourage theta brainwaves for calm. Search for 6Hz tracks on YouTube or Spotify. Use during rest, in the background while you do your thing, in meditation or before sleep.
- **Mindful Movement** - Walk, stretch, dance. Low-intensity movement soothes cortisol. High intensity is best in the follicular/ovulatory phase when your body can handle more stress. However if you're highly burnt out, it's not recommended.
- **Nature time** - Unplug and spend time in natural settings. Even 15 minutes can lower cortisol significantly.
- **Balance your blood sugar** - Eat protein/fat with every meal, avoid skipping meals, avoid excessive processed foods.
- **Reduce blue light before bed** - Unplug 30-60 mins before sleep. Choose calming rituals instead:
 - Cuddle a Loved one
 - Read fiction or poetry
 - Yin yoga or stretching
 - Listen to calming audio

Supplements & Nutrition

- **Magnesium glycinate** - Excellent for calming the nervous system and aiding sleep.
- **B-vitamins (esp. B5,B6,B12)** - Supports adrenal function and hormone regulation.
- **Omega-3 fatty acids** - Help regulate inflammation and support mood.
- **Vitamin C:** The adrenal glands use more vitamin C than almost any other organ.
- **Zinc:** Crucial for hormone production, immune support & NS regulation.
- **Adaptogens** (optional) - Herbs like *ashwagandha*, *rhodiola*, or *holy basil* may help modulate cortisol, but do have different impacts on different people so listen to your body. (Work with a qualified herbalist.)

Emotional & Relational Support

- **Express your emotions** - Unfelt/unexpressed emotions become stress, they live in the body. (see How to Feel Feelings content).
- **Connect with safe people** - Being around people who feel *safe* and *seen* with reduces cortisol. Community is medicine.
- **Boundary work**: working on your ability to set boundaries is like building the haven that protects the softer parts of you.
- **Rest in your luteal & menstrual phase** - Honour your body's cyclical need for inwardness & slowness.
- **Release perfectionism** - Chronic cortisol can be a response to inner pressure. Your worth is not tied to your output.

Optional Additions (if you'd like to expand further)

- **Castor oil packs** over the liver to support detoxification and hormone balance
- **Dry brushing** - can support lymphatic system & bring you into your body
- **Sound healing / crystal bowls** - vibrational therapies that signal calm
- **Smell therapy (Aromatherapy)** - Certain scents like bergamot, frankincense, sandalwood & rose have been shown to reduce cortisol and anxiety.

In Closing...

We live in a world that was *not* built to honour slowness, cycles or emotional needs. In many ways, chronic cortisol elevation is a response to this world... *not a personal failing*. Every time you choose nourishment, rest, connection, or stillness... you are reclaiming your rhythm. That is courageous. That is healing.

Love,
Sasha Blossom