NutriLife Clinic
OPTIMUM HEALTH FOR BODY AND MIND

Testing Your Adrenal Stress Levels

by Janine Fahri, BSc (Hons) BANT CNHC

We are no strangers to stress in today's frenetic society – traffic jams, train delays, meetings, deadlines, unemployment, difficult relationships, demanding children, ageing parents, school holidays, financial worries, and now the Coronavirus! 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. 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?

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

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 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 #3: 6pm
Sample #2: 1pm	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 nutritional therapy really comes into its own.

Learning HOW, WHAT and WHEN to eat 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.

To order a test kit, contact Janine Fahri on 07956 848 002 or info@nutrilifeclinic.com

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Founder of NutriLife Clinic in Central London, Janine Fahri is a leading nutrition and lifestyle expert with BSc (Hons) degrees in both Psychology and Nutritional Therapy with First Class Honours. Adopting a practical and caring approach, Janine devises personal nutrition and lifestyle programmes tailored to suit individual needs. She also presents seminars to the general public and corporate sector on a variety of topics including healthy eating, anti-ageing, and stress management.

In addition to her private practice, Janine works alongside consultant neurosurgeons and their team in Harley Street, and she lectures to the medical profession 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.

Janine is frequently quoted in the media as an authority on the role of nutrition in optimum health and she regularly contributes to leading publications, including The Times, Telegraph, Daily Mail, Runner's World, Men's Health, Red, More! and Marie Claire, and ELLE magazine.

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Janine Fahri is an accredited member of the British Association for Applied Nutrition and Nutritional Therapy (BANT), which governs standards of professionalism in nutritional therapy. She is also registered with the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) and is a Senior Associate Member of the Royal Society of Medicine.