



► Could It Be Adrenal Fatigue?

Fatigue, chronic stress, belly fat and salty cravings are just a few symptoms of adrenal fatigue, but it can be healed naturally through diet and lifestyle changes

By Christine M. Okezie, CHHC, Natural Food Chef

DO YOU FEEL CONSTANTLY TIRED AND CAN'T EXPLAIN why? Do you have difficulty coping with stressful situations or struggle getting out of bed in the morning no matter how much sleep you get?

Are you putting on belly fat? Craving salty foods? Having trouble with low blood sugar or low thyroid function?

If you are having any of these symptoms, there's a good chance you are suffering from a condition

known as adrenal fatigue, coined by author Dr. James L. Wilson, who described this stress-related condition as the "21st Century Stress Syndrome."

Adrenal fatigue happens when your adrenal glands, two walnut-shaped glands that sit above your kidneys, become depleted as a result of the chronic unrelenting stress of everyday life. Your adrenal glands play an important role in maintaining a healthy mood, metabolism and immune



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system by producing hormones that affect virtually every organ and tissue in the body.

Most importantly, they regulate the body's response to stress through the production of the hormone cortisol. When our adrenals malfunction, it disrupts our cortisol levels and wreaks havoc on our daily life. Episodes of either acute or prolonged chronic stress, such as tension at work, a relationship in turmoil, sudden life change, caring for a sick family member, or some other draining responsibility, can cause our adrenal glands to constantly pump out cortisol until they eventually become overloaded and ineffective.

Dietary and lifestyle choices also play a significant role in causing adrenal fatigue. Skipping meals, imbalanced food choices, poor work life balance, sleep deprivation, and overdependence on caffeine or alcohol also depletes the adrenal glands and puts us on the path to serious burnout.

Understanding the stress response in the body is key to understanding adrenal fatigue. The stress response actually involves three major organs that include the hypothalamus, pituitary and adrenal glands (aka the "HPA axis"). This HPA axis dictates the level of stress hormones in

the body. When we encounter a stressor, the process starts in our brain when the hypothalamus sends a message to our pituitary gland, which in turn signals the adrenal glands to release stress hormones including cortisol and epinephrine. Among other things, these hormones increase our blood sugar, and raise our heart rate and blood pressure, readying the body to deal with whatever is causing us stress. This interaction continues until our hormones reach the levels that our body needs, and then another series of automatic hormone signaling occurs to switch them off.

We can understand how this "fight or flight response" evolved to protect our hunter-gatherer ancestors from immediate threats and predators, functioning on the body's need for a short burst of stress hormones. But what happens when you have adrenal fatigue?

The HPA axis interaction is still taking place, but when the message reaches your adrenals, nothing happens. The adrenal glands have become so worn out that they are unable to produce the hormones that you need to react to a stressful situation. As a result, our hormone levels drop and our endocrine system attempts to compensate, which only leads to further hormone disruption throughout the body, and every bodily

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function is affected. Every symptom of adrenal fatigue, including tiredness, inability to focus, low sex drive, weight gain and disrupted sleep cycle can be traced back to the hormone cascade that results from this HPA axis dysfunction.

So now you can really see how chronic unmanaged stress leads to actual physiological changes in the body that can predispose us to weight problems, digestive disorders, and mood and hormone imbalance. Bottom line, as long as our cortisol levels are out of balance, achieving our ideal weight and optimizing mood, metabolism and energy levels will continue to be a losing battle.

To make an accurate diagnosis, you'll want to seek out an integrative or functional medicine practitioner with experience in treating adrenal fatigue. To diagnose adrenal fatigue correctly requires using a combination of lab testing and feedback from the patient. The major lab test used is the saliva cortisol test, which will measure the cortisol levels within your cells and map your cortisol over a 24-hour cycle.

Take heart, though — the great news is that adrenal fatigue can be healed naturally. Treatment

involves reducing the stress on your body and your mind.

HERE ARE MY TOP 7 TIPS FOR KEEPING OUR ADRENALS HEALTHY NATURALLY

- **Eat Whole and Eat Regularly** — Eat clean animal protein, organic vegetables and fruits. Favor fresh fruits and starchy vegetables for carb intake. Eliminate inflammatory foods containing refined sugar, gluten and dairy. Don't skip meals. Eat three main balanced meals plus two balanced snacks throughout the day. Cortisol plays a key role in managing our blood sugar so it's essential we keep our blood sugar as level as possible to lighten the load on our adrenal glands.
- **Get at Least Seven Hours of Sleep a Night** — Make a regular sleep routine priority No. 1. Get to bed by 10pm each night and try to stick to that for a month depending on your degree of adrenal fatigue. Sleep deprivation raises cortisol levels and decreases ghrelin and leptin levels, the hormones that regulate our hunger and fullness signals.



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Recipe: Grilled Salmon with Chickpeas

Yield: Serves 4

Ingredients:

4 5 oz. salmon filets
2 cups chickpeas
4 large handful of baby arugula
4 large handfuls of mesclun greens
1 small red onion, thinly sliced
½ cup grape tomatoes, halved
½ medium size orange or yellow bell pepper, diced small
4 tablespoons crumbled feta cheese
2 tablespoons pine nuts, toasted

Dressing:

½ cup extra virgin olive oil
Juice of ½ small lemon
2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar

2 teaspoons honey
1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
Course salt and ground pepper to taste

Procedure:

1. To cook the salmon: Prepare an outdoor grill over medium heat. Coat the salmon with olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Grill for about 3 minutes on each side, or until the fish is opaque with a slightly rosy center when flaked in the thickest part with the tip of a small knife. Remove from the grill.
2. In a small bowl, whisk together the dressing ingredients.



3. In a large salad bowl, combine all the salad makings. Pour dressing over salad and toss well.
4. Mound the salad in the center of a large serving platter or four dinner plates.

■ Stop Chronic Dieting and Intense Exercising

— Studies show that calorie restriction and even monitoring calories increases chronic psychological stress and cortisol production. Focus on quality instead of quantity by eating whole real foods. Intense exercise wreaks havoc on exhausted adrenals by spiking cortisol. As you heal your adrenals, try short, slow walks outside in nature and incorporate strength training as you recover.

■ Minimize Caffeine and Alcohol Intake

— These disrupt cortisol levels. Cut these “fake” sources of energy out completely if you are recovering from adrenal fatigue.

■ Eliminate Toxic Fats

— Get rid of hydrogenated oils, soybean oil, cottonseed oil and canola oil. They create systemic inflammation in the body. Chronic inflammation means soaring cortisol levels, which wreaks havoc on the immune system. Emphasize sources of healthy fats from grass-fed butter and ghee, coconut oil, pastured egg yolks and grass-fed meats.

■ Get Enough Vitamins B and C and Magnesium

— Get enough B vitamins

(dark leafy greens), vitamin C (bell peppers and citrus fruits) and magnesium (pumpkin seeds, lentils) in your diet since these vitamins and minerals help to lower cortisol levels.

■ Mind-Body Practice

— Incorporate daily deep breathing activities (yoga, tai chi, meditation) to calm the body, refocus the mind and decrease stress, which in turn will naturally reduce your cortisol level.

ABOUT CHRISTINE M. OKEZIE

Christine M. Okezie is a graduate of the Natural Gourmet Institute for Health and Culinary Arts in New York, and the Institute for Integrative Nutrition. She founded her company, Your Delicious Balance, to counsel individuals to heal themselves through real food and positive lifestyle choices. Her healing strategies are based on whole foods nutrition, and she guides her clients to adopt a plant-centered way of eating that offers anti-inflammatory and detoxifying benefits to the body. For more information, visit her Web site at www.yourdeliciousbalance.com or call (201) 889-5001.

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“The No Diet Cookbook: Learn to Eat for Health and Pleasure,” by Christine M. Okezie