

[IMAGE]

What is Cortisol and How Does it Affect Your Health?

By Julie T. Chen, MD

Cortisol is a stress hormone that your body secretes to help your organs function optimally, quickly, and more effectively during periods of stress. This is part of that "fight or flight" response where when stressed, your body thinks it needs to crank up the function of everything including your heart rate to get you out of trouble fast.

This worked great when we used to have to run away from predators while out hunting, but unlike our ancestors, we don't need to run away from lions anymore but our body continues to have this response when we are anxious or stressed. Over time, this takes a toll on our body.

Nowadays, we are more likely to be running away from office meetings or stressful exams more than anything else but we still have this cortisol response during times of stress; just as when our ancestors needed to run from a predator.

The cortisol response was meant for short term bouts of stress. Unfortunately, our modern day lives seem to be fraught with incendiary events that cause long term cortisol secretion instead of the intended short term bouts meant for "fight or flight" away from predators.

If your level of cortisol is always relatively elevated because you are always stressed about life events or if you are just overall anxious all the time, our adrenals (which produce cortisol) may become fatigued and adrenal fatigue tends to lead to other issues like hair loss, increased inflammation, insomnia, more anxiety, fatigue, and chronic aches and pains, just to name a few issues. Worsening weight gain, hotflashes and thyroid dysfunction can also be linked to adrenal fatigue.

stress - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark So, if you are concerned about your adrenal function, ask your doctor for a saliva test or a 24-hour urine test for cortisol level to see if you are doing alright or if your function has diminished. If you are noticing more and more belly fat formation and retention, that may also indicate elevated cortisol issues. But in general, if you are constantly feeling stressed, you can be sure that your adrenals are having to work overtime and your cortisol level is likely unhealthily elevated.

My main suggestion is to intentionally implement stress management techniques into your daily schedule. Some common options I generally suggest for my patients in my integrative medicine clinic in San Jose CA are exercise, taking time to listen to music, playing with your favorite pet, or talking to loved ones. By incorporating activities on a daily basis where you allow your body some downtime and relaxation, you'll naturally be helping your cortisol level return to normal levels and you will be giving your adrenals a break...which ultimately, can help you looking and feeling younger no matter how many predatory office meetings you want to run from.

Dr. Julie T. Chen is board-certified in internal medicine and fellowship-trained and board-certified in integrative medicine. She has her own medical practice in San Jose, Calif. She is the medical director of corporation wellness at several Silicon Valley-based corporations, is on several medical expert panels of Web sites and nonprofit organizations, is a recurring monthly columnist for several national magazines, and has been featured in radio, newspaper, and magazine interviews. She incorporates various healing modalities into her practice including, but is not limited to, medical acupuncture, Chinese scalp acupuncture, clinical hypnotherapy, strain-counterstrain osteopathic manipulations, and biofeedback. To learn more, visit www.makinghealthyez.com.

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