

2026 EDITION

Is 'Adrenal Fatigue' Real?

What Stress Actually Does to Your Body —
and What Helps



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Tired, wired, and worn down?

Do you wake up wishing you could roll over and go back to sleep? Feel sluggish, low, and stuck? Stress may be part of it, but it's worth finding out what else is going on.

Our adrenal glands respond to stress by pumping out hormones to regulate bodily functions and provide the energy we need to escape danger. Think of a rabbit being chased by a coyote. The rabbit gets a sudden rush of adrenaline, which sharpens her senses, speeds her heart, and dumps sugar into her blood to fuel her rabbit muscles. If the chase goes on, a second wave, cortisol, keeps the fuel coming.¹

Once she's safely out of harm's way, the chemical process resolves and she returns to normal. Insulin mops that extra glucose back into her cells, her breathing and heart rate slow down, and all is once again well in her world.

Now imagine she is constantly being pursued. Eventually, she wouldn't be able to keep up, and she'd collapse (and become dinner for the coyote).

Constant stress works on us in a similar way. Daily stresses from trying to juggle a career, a family, a social life, and more, all while living up to unrealistic expectations we put on ourselves, keep our alarm switched on, just like the poor rabbit's. Your adrenals don't wear out, but living in a constant state of alarm takes a real toll on your sleep, mood, blood pressure, and blood sugar.¹

Never fear. You're about to learn some ways to calm your stress response and feel more like yourself.

I used to call this adrenal fatigue. I don't anymore. Here's why.



What Are Adrenal Glands?

Adrenal glands are small organs of the endocrine system located on top of both kidneys.²

Structure

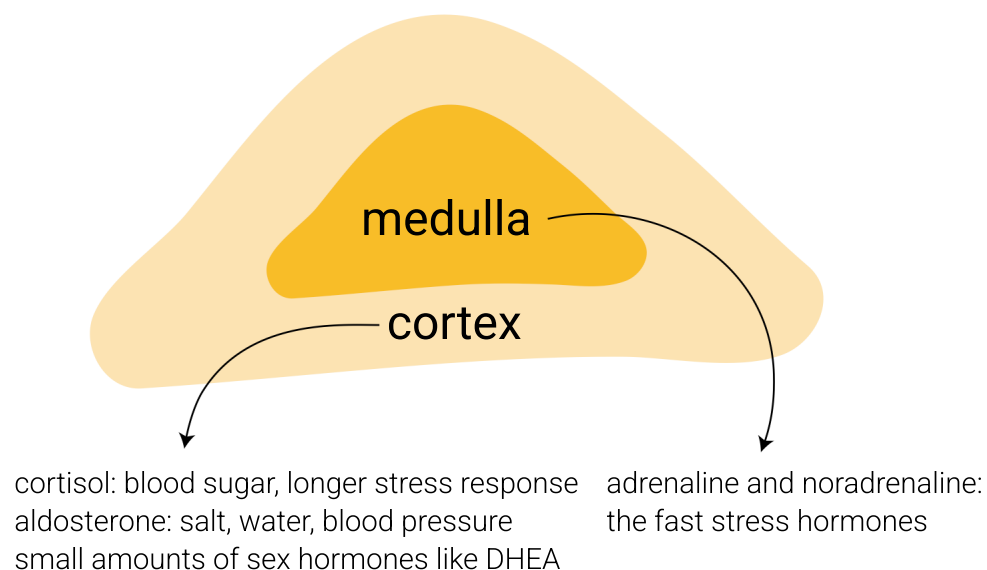
Each adrenal gland consists of a medulla and a cortex.

Adrenal Medulla

The adrenal medulla, the center, makes adrenaline and noradrenaline, the fast 'fight or flight' hormones.

Adrenal Cortex

The adrenal cortex, the outer layer, makes cortisol, aldosterone, and small amounts of sex hormones like DHEA. Together they help regulate blood sugar, salt and water balance, blood pressure, and the longer stress response.²



What Your Adrenals Do

The four main players from the adrenal glands include epinephrine, norepinephrine, aldosterone and cortisol, plus small amounts of androgens such as DHEA. These hormones control many important functions, including:²

- Metabolism
- Blood sugar
- Blood pressure
- Electrolyte and water balance
- Early signs of puberty, such as body hair
- Stress response
- Balance of sex hormones

What the Evidence Says About Adrenal Fatigue

Here's the honest version.

The idea behind "adrenal fatigue" goes like this: years of stress wear out your adrenal glands, until they can't make enough cortisol to keep you going.

It's a tidy story. I told it too. The first version of this guide was built on it.

Then I went back to the research.

In 2016, two endocrinologists reviewed 58 studies of adrenal function in people with fatigue. The results contradicted each other, whatever test was used, and they concluded that adrenal fatigue "is still a myth."³

The Endocrine Society, which represents hormone doctors worldwide, says there is no scientific proof that adrenal fatigue is a real medical condition.⁴

Mayo Clinic and Cleveland Clinic agree. It isn't an accepted diagnosis, and your adrenals don't simply "tire out."^{5,6}

So what *is* real?

Your exhaustion is real. Stress really does change your stress hormones, your sleep, your blood pressure, and your mood.¹

But a vague label can hide the actual cause, like depression, sleep apnea, or a thyroid problem, so it never gets treated.^{4,5}

And the pills sold to fix it can hurt. When Mayo Clinic researchers tested 12 "adrenal support" supplements, every one contained thyroid hormone, and most contained at least one steroid hormone.⁷ Taking hormones you don't need can make your own adrenal glands stop working.⁴

That's not support. That's a risk nobody told you about.





So Why Am I This Tired?

Your tiredness is real, and it usually has a real cause that can be found. These are some of the most common:^{4,8,9}

- Poor or short sleep
- Sleep apnea
- Depression and anxiety
- Low thyroid
- Anemia or low iron
- Low vitamin B12
- Perimenopause and menopause
- Side effects of medicines
- Long-term stress itself

Bring this list to your doctor.

Why I stopped using the term

I used “adrenal fatigue” for years. It gave a name to something real that people felt. But I’m a pharmacist, and my job is to follow the evidence even when it takes away a word I liked.

The evidence says the adrenals don’t burn out from stress, and the products sold for it can carry hidden hormones.^{3,7}

So I changed my mind. That’s not backpedaling. That’s science working the way it’s supposed to.

Real Adrenal Conditions and When to See a Doctor

Your adrenals *can* go wrong. When they do, it's usually specific, testable, and treatable.

Adrenal insufficiency (including Addison's disease).

The glands make too little cortisol. Watch for fatigue that doesn't lift, muscle weakness, weight loss, poor appetite, belly pain, nausea, dizziness when you stand up, and craving salt. In Addison's, the skin can darken.^{5,10} It can also happen when steroid medicines like prednisone are stopped, so never stop them on your own.^{6,10}

Cushing's syndrome.

Too much cortisol, most often from steroid medicines. Signs include weight gain in the face, upper back, and belly, wide purple stretch marks, easy bruising, weak muscles, and high blood pressure or blood sugar.¹¹

Pheochromocytoma.

A rare, usually noncancerous adrenal tumor that releases bursts of adrenaline. Think sudden spells of pounding headache, sweating, and racing heart, with high blood pressure.^{12,13}

Primary aldosteronism.

Too much aldosterone, which drives up blood pressure. It's far more common than people think, and since 2025 the Endocrine Society recommends that everyone with high blood pressure get a simple blood test for it.¹⁴

See your doctor if tiredness lasts more than a few weeks, you're losing or gaining weight without trying, you get dizzy when you stand, or your blood pressure is hard to control. Real adrenal problems are diagnosed by a doctor with proper testing, not online quizzes or mail-order 'adrenal stress' kits.^{3,6}

Call 911 for severe weakness, confusion, fainting, or vomiting with belly pain, especially if you have adrenal disease or take steroids. That can be adrenal crisis.¹⁵

What Chronic Stress Really Does

Stress isn't the enemy. It's the system that got the rabbit home. The trouble starts when the alarm never switches off.

When stress keeps coming, repeated surges of adrenaline and a steady flow of cortisol keep your body revved up and on high alert. Over time, that can push up your blood pressure, stir up your appetite and add weight, cut into sleep and exercise, and feed anxiety and low mood.¹

What keeps the alarm on

- Grief and loss
- Trauma, recent or long past
- Too much on your plate for too long
- Perfectionism, and the unrealistic expectations we put on ourselves
- Short or broken sleep

The good news is that the same system that switches on can learn to switch off. Slow breathing and meditation, regular movement, and the people who love you all help it get there.¹

The goal isn't a stress-free life. It's an alarm that knows how to switch off.

What Actually Helps

None of this comes in a bottle, and none of it is glamorous. But it helps, whatever turns out to be behind your tiredness.^{1,4}

- **Keep a regular sleep window.** Go to bed and get up at about the same time every day.
- **Move most days.** A walk counts.
- **Go easy on caffeine, especially after noon, and on added sugar and ultra-processed snacks.**
- **Take 10 minutes to breathe, pray, or meditate.**
- **Spend time with people you love.**
- **Practice saying no.** Your calendar is part of your stress response.



Supplements Studied for Stress: An Honest Look

These are the supplements people ask me about most for stress. Here's what the research actually found, and what to watch for.*

Herbs

Ashwagandha

Ashwagandha is the most studied herb for stress. In several small trials, adults under stress who took it reported less stress and had lower cortisol, though results vary between studies.¹⁶⁻¹⁸

Safety first

Don't take it if you're pregnant, breastfeeding, or have thyroid, liver, or autoimmune disease. Stop and call your doctor if you notice yellow skin, dark urine, or itching. It can add to the effect of sedatives and sleep aids. Its safety has only been studied for short-term use, up to about three months.^{19,20}

Rhodiola rosea

In one trial in people with stress-related fatigue, rhodiola improved burnout symptoms and concentration over four weeks and lowered the morning cortisol rise. It did not beat placebo for depression.²¹

Panax ginseng

In one small trial in people with unexplained chronic fatigue, Panax ginseng improved mental fatigue and lowered markers of oxidative stress over four weeks. It can lower blood sugar and may interact with warfarin.^{22,23}

Herbs are drugs too. Check with your pharmacist before combining them with medicines, and tell your doctor everything you take.

*These statements have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. These products are not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease.

Vitamins and Minerals

Magnesium

Magnesium helps nerves and muscles relax, and low magnesium is linked to anxiety. The evidence that supplements ease anxiety is suggestive but weak. Keep supplements under 350 mg a day unless your doctor says otherwise.^{24,25}

Vitamin C

In one trial, high-dose vitamin C blunted the blood pressure spike and feeling of stress during a public-speaking test. The dose used was above the 2,000 mg daily upper limit, so food first.^{26,27}

Pantothenic acid (vitamin B5)

Vitamin B5 is needed to make cortisol and other hormones, but almost everyone gets plenty from food, so a supplement is rarely needed.²⁸

Skip anything labeled “adrenal support” or “adrenal glandular.”

When Mayo Clinic researchers tested 12 of these products, every one contained thyroid hormone, and most contained at least one steroid hormone, including a prescription steroid in a quarter of them.⁷ Hormones you don't need can shut down your own.⁴

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