



These days, we tend to accept that feeling constantly worn out and grumpy is just a part of modern life. But there may be a biological reason. A part of the body most of us have never heard of may not be working properly, according to some experts. Here's how your adrenal glands could be affecting your health.

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A MODERN-DAY PROBLEM

How ongoing stress affects
a vital part of the body

It's known as the "21st Century syndrome" – a disorder that leaves you tired, irritable and feeling as if life is just too much to cope with.

Adrenal fatigue is a side effect of modern-day living and the stress that it causes, according to alternative medicine practitioners.

The condition has been described in medical texts since the late 1800s but wasn't given the name adrenal fatigue until 12 years ago, by Canadian doctor and scientist James Wilson. However, it has yet to be accepted by mainstream medicine.

But some conventional medical practitioners are keeping a fairly open mind. For example, in the UK the Department of Health says it is "aware

of the existence of the term and watching developments in the field".

What is accepted is that ongoing stress can make you sick and it affects millions of people around the world.

WHAT IS ADRENAL FATIGUE?

It's a syndrome made up of a variety of nonspecific ailments. Supporters say it's due to the adrenal glands – walnut-shaped glands that sit above the kidneys – becoming overworked.

The adrenal glands make and send out dozens of important hormones, including cortisol and adrenalin. When your body suffers any kind of stress (psychological

emotional or physical), your adrenals kick into action, releasing these hormones to regulate energy production, heart rate, immune function and other processes to help your body deal with stress.

If you are frequently stressed, or your adrenals have been weakened by chronic problems such as illness or poor nutrition, they may become overwhelmed and no longer work properly.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

The most common symptoms are:

- Feeling tired in the morning and having difficulty getting up, even after a good night's sleep.

- Tiredness, especially in the early morning and mid-afternoon.
- Constantly feeling run-down, stressed or overwhelmed.
- Difficulty getting back to normal after being stressed or sick.
- Craving salty or sweet snacks.
- Needing stimulants such as coffee, chocolate or cola to keep going.
- Decreased sex drive.
- Weight gain and difficulty losing weight.
- Feeling light-headed.
- Worsening PMS.
- Foggy thinking and poor memory.

HOW DO YOU KNOW YOU'VE GOT IT?

According to Dr James Wilson, the Canadian doctor who came up with the term adrenal fatigue, there are tests available that can show whether your adrenal glands are working properly by looking at the amount of stress hormones found in your saliva. There are some labs in New Zealand that will examine for the condition, but very few GPs tend to ask for the tests.

If you are concerned about feeling fatigued or having any of the other symptoms listed here, it is important that you talk to your doctor – not only to see if it is possible to be tested for adrenal fatigue but because you may also need to be tested for other conditions. Your symptoms could be signs of other illnesses.

HOW SERIOUS IS ADRENAL FATIGUE?

Some people only have one episode and recover without too many problems, while for others, their symptoms become chronic, last many years and have a huge impact on their lives.

Adrenal fatigue is not as severe as Addison's disease – a very serious illness in which the adrenal glands don't make enough hormones, usually because they've been damaged due to a problem with the immune system.

Symptoms of Addison's disease can include weight loss, muscle weakness, fatigue that gets worse over time, low blood pressure and patchy or dark skin.

People with Addison's disease need to take hormone pills for the rest of their lives – If it's not treated, it can be fatal.



CAN IT AFFECT YOUR WEIGHT?

One of the hormones secreted by your adrenal glands is cortisol, which regulates blood sugar levels. When you're under stress, the adrenals release cortisol to increase blood sugar, so you've got the energy to deal with what is stressing you (thousands of years ago, this was usually a threat such as a predatory animal).

If you're constantly stressed, your adrenal glands become exhausted from having to work so hard and your cortisol output is reduced, so your blood sugar levels aren't kept under control.

Your body knows that it is going to have trouble dealing with stress if it can't release enough cortisol so it prepares for the possibility that it may need energy by storing fat.

DID YOU KNOW? People with adrenal fatigue may feel worn out during the day but then perk up later, around 6 or 7pm.



WHAT CAUSES ADRENAL FATIGUE?

The basic cause is usually stress, including:

- Physical stress, such as surgery or injury.
- Emotional or psychological stress from situations in your life.
- Environmental stress from chemicals and pollutants in the air, water or food.

Poor nutrition and lifestyle choices – such as using sugary or caffeinated food as stimulants and not getting enough sleep – may also play a part.

HOW DO YOU TREAT ADRENAL FATIGUE?

Some practitioners sell products they say are specially created to work on the adrenal glands. These tend to combine a variety of nutritional supplements and herbs (such as Siberian ginseng). While some people swear by them, their effectiveness hasn't been proven in recognised trials.

If you are interested in taking dietary or herbal supplements for adrenal fatigue, you should get advice from a professional, such as a naturopath, who understands the condition.

Lifestyle advice given for getting your adrenal glands back on track is generally the same as that given for staying healthy. That is:

- Exercising regularly.
- Avoiding or removing factors in your life that make you stressed. If that's not possible, learning to deal with stress using techniques such as positive thinking and meditation.

- Avoiding environmental toxins.
- Giving up smoking.
- Cutting foods that are high in sugar, salt and saturated fat from your diet.
- Eating plenty of fruit and vegetables, whole grains, good-quality protein and oily fish.
- Eating regularly and not skipping any meals.
- Making sure you are getting zinc, magnesium and vitamins C, B5 and B12 in your diet.
- Getting plenty of sleep.

