

Eat right, sleep tight and keep life from pushing your buttons

By Casey Seidenberg | October 1, 2013



I am a huge proponent of feeding our kids well. They are our future. Their little bodies are growing like weeds, and their brains are being fueled by their food. But so are ours.

Our brains might not grow as fast as our children's, but they are being used and taxed, as are our bodies. We need to feed ourselves just as well as we feed our children.

I have been hearing more and more women in particular who are beginning to suffer seemingly simple health problems, such as fatigue and low energy (even with regular sleep), weight gain, brain fog, insomnia, low tolerance for stressful situations and anxiety. According to James Wilson in his book "Adrenal Fatigue: The 21st Century Stress Syndrome," it's estimated "that up to 80 percent of adults experience adrenal fatigue during their lifetimes, yet it remains one of the most under-diagnosed illnesses in the United States."

So what is adrenal fatigue? In a nutshell, a person overworks her adrenal glands, which are the little glands above the kidneys that produce stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. In prehistoric times, these hormones were valuable for major fight-or-flight events, such as a bear approaching. After the bear retreated, the person would return to her regular routine, which included a good night's sleep because there was no electricity or laptop to tempt her to burn the midnight oil.

These days, especially in a fast-paced, high-pressure environment, people produce these hormones not just occasionally but all day long. Rushing kids out the door in the morning when they can't find a book triggers stress hormones. When you're stuck in traffic or a work deadline looms, cortisol and adrenaline show up. Worry about finances, job security or a sick parent causes constant stress. Even when kids fight, many parents get that tense feeling of stress. When this happens all day long, the adrenals can become exhausted and will stop functioning efficiently. This taxes many other parts of the body.

And when the day is over, many folks don't rest and repair enough. (According to a 2006 study in the Journal of Epidemiology, the average person spends just over six hours asleep per night.) We push ourselves relentlessly to do more, to be in contact with everyone day and night. Even on vacation we are attached to a BlackBerry. We constantly feel we should get more done, so we never allow our bodies to emotionally relax or to physically stop producing those chemicals.

Many people use alcohol to relax, and, like caffeine, which is often used to stimulate, alcohol is taxing to the adrenals.

The result is a feeling of exhaustion, broken sleep patterns, food cravings, the need to use caffeine and sugar for energy, fat storage, lack of concentration, grouchiness and anxiety. Doesn't sound pretty, does it?

If you think your adrenals might be overworked, here are a few suggestions:

- Eat regularly, snack healthfully and don't skip meals.
- Eat within one hour of getting up to restore blood sugar levels.
- Include protein in every meal and snack.
- Skip caffeine and cut out processed sugar, both of which are stimulants that strain the adrenal glands.
- Limit alcohol.
- Get a minimum of seven hours of sleep every night.
- Stick to gentle exercise — hot yoga and strenuous running can be depleting.
- Ask your doctor about herbal adrenal supplements.
- Pick up “Is It Me or My Adrenals?” by Marcelle Pick for more details on the adrenals and the way these little organs affect our health.