

VOGUE

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DAILY GRIND
WITH STRESS LEVELS
SKYROCKETING,
A NEW DIAGNOSIS
IS ON THE RISE.

THE RAGGED EDGE

Overtired and undersexed? It could be adrenal fatigue syndrome. **Ginny Graves** reports.

In our preholiday, post-stimulus, underemployed, hypertweeted world, chronic stress is almost a given. So ubiquitous are frayed nerves that some doctors now believe the relentless activation of our fight-or-flight instinct is spawning a virtual epidemic of hormone-related weariness.

"I've never seen stress levels higher. It's affecting people's health," says Amy Saltzman, M.D., an internist in Menlo Park, California, who has built her practice around treating stress-related illnesses, particularly in women. "When we're under long-term stress, our adrenal glands continually churn out high levels of the hormone cortisol. Eventually, the adrenals can't sustain that level of activation, cortisol levels plummet, and your body can no longer respond effectively to stress."

The result: adrenal fatigue, a sort of chronic fatigue lite—ennui minus the total debilitation—that's increasingly being diagnosed among the recession-weary and habitually anxious. Marked by low cortisol, it causes fatigue; concentration problems; irritability; lightheadedness upon standing; difficulty fighting infections; and low sex drive—in other words, if your

friends are like mine, the complaints that bedevil just about every successful woman you know.

"I was sleeping till ten and still felt tired," says my friend Eileen, who was diagnosed with adrenal fatigue last February after months of worry that her marketing job was going to be eliminated (it wasn't, thankfully). She saw several doctors before saliva tests showed that her cortisol was very low. "I had to get tons of rest and go on a saintlike diet, but after a few months I felt better."

The theory that low cortisol can undermine our health is just now being validated by science, but many doctors remain unconvinced. "If you have a major period of stress, you may go through a phase where you're tired and your cortisol levels are in the low-normal range, but adrenal fatigue isn't a real diagnosis," says George Chrousos, M.D., a preeminent adrenal researcher. "It's just a new way of saying *burnout*."

Part of the debate stems from the fact that adrenal function, like thyroid function, lies on a spectrum, and doctors are taught that only the outliers—those with cortisol in the highest or lowest 2 percent—are

abnormal. "So if your cortisol is in the lowest 5 to 10 percent, you're considered normal," says Kent Holtorf, M.D., a hormone specialist who has studied adrenal fatigue. "That's like saying it's normal to get a D on a test."

As a result, if you go to a doctor with a list of adrenal-related symptoms, you may get anything from a thyroid test to a referral to a therapist. But as research on the low cortisol-fatigue connection accumulates—as it is doing—that's likely to change. For instance, two recent studies by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have found that women with chronic fatigue syndrome (another controversial condition that earned official respect this fall after a study linked the illness to a virus) have unusually low levels of cortisol, leading researchers to suspect a connection between the hormone and the illness. And when researchers at the University of Wisconsin recently compared mothers of autistic teens with mothers of children without disabilities, they found that the moms of autistic kids had lower levels of cortisol—and far higher levels of stress and fatigue.

"This depletion syndrome linked to adrenal functioning is real—and treatable," says Marsha Mailick Seltzer, Ph.D., lead author of the study.

The solution, alas, brings us back to the underlying cause: We must learn to simmer down, unwind, let go—or at least quit obsessing about our 401(k)s. The first step: Make an appointment with your internist (or alternative doctor), who will assess your adrenal function—a four-times-a-day saliva test. If you're low, you may benefit from supplements (see below) as well as lifestyle rehab.

The prescription: Eat a clean diet; rest; exercise regularly; and devote time every day to stress relief—meaning, book a massage. Doctor's orders. □

BALANCING ACT

A number of supplements have been found to revive flagging adrenals. Three to try:

ASIAN GINSENG: Studies have shown that 50 to 200 milligrams a day can help rebalance cortisol in one to two months.

VITAMIN B COMPLEX: "It's necessary for adrenal function and helps the body deal with stress," says Jannet Huang, M.D., an endocrinologist and medical director of the Center for Optimal Health in Irvine, California.

FISH OIL: Huang calls the supplement "a natural antidepressant."—G.G.

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