

What's Really Causing That Belly Fat, and What You Can Do About It

Have you ever experienced a particularly stressful time where you started putting on weight for no apparent reason? You were eating about the same amount of food and getting about the same amount of exercise, yet the scale started moving up. Your body's stress response had affected your hormones.

Stress comes in many forms—intense work demands, relationship problems, buying a new home (or selling an old one), caring for an aging parent or a sick child, illness, loss, injury or trauma. It all impacts the body.

The adrenal glands manage our stress responses by secreting hormones in response to our stress levels. When the adrenals are overworked (and “under paid”; i.e., not receiving extra support), the body prepares for impending disaster—it stores fat. Excess cortisol causes us to crave food—and often foods we don't always eat such as high-fat, sugary or salty foods.

We may lose precious sleep because overworked adrenals cause us to wake up during the night or not be able to fall asleep. This affects our appetite hormones: ghrelin (the appetite-stimulating hormone; raises desire for high-carb foods) goes up, and leptin (the appetite-control hormone) goes down. We get more tired and move a little slower, thus we burn fewer calories. Then we gain weight. And if you're of a certain age, you may also suffer from menopausal symptoms.

The Adrenal Glands and The HPA Axis

The adrenals are small walnut-shaped organs that are located just above the kidneys. They release hormones such as cortisol in response to stress, whether it's perceived or real. The

adrenals are controlled by the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis.

There is a negative feedback loop that governs the amount of adrenal hormones secreted. The HPA axis adjusts cortisol levels according to the body's need by a hormone called adrenal corticotrophic hormone (ACTH). It is secreted by the pituitary gland in response to signals from the hypothalamus. When ACTH binds to the adrenal cells, a chain reaction occurs within the cells prompting the release of cholesterol that it is synthesized into pregnenolone, the first hormone in the adrenal cascade. After this, cortisol is released into the blood stream where it travels in the circulatory system to all parts of the body and back to the hypothalamus.

Belly Fat: A Signal of Adrenal Fatigue

Adrenal imbalance can contribute to an expanded waistline. Here's the science: Normally when we feel hungry, our blood sugar drops and the brain sends a message to the adrenal glands to release cortisol. Cortisol activates glucose, fat and amino acids to keep the body fueled until we eat. Cortisol maintains blood-sugar levels, and insulin helps cells absorb glucose.

When we have long-term stress, both insulin and cortisol remain elevated in the blood, and the extra glucose is stored as fat—mostly in the abdomen. Scientists have discovered that fat cells actually have special receptors for cortisol. There are more of these receptors in our abdominal fat cells than anywhere else in the body. In addition, scientists have shown that belly fat is actually an active tissue, acting like an endocrine organ that responds to stress responses by actually welcoming more fat to be deposited. This is an ongoing cycle until steps are taken to correct this adrenal imbalance.

Reboot Your Adrenals and Heal

- **You need to eat protein.** Every meal or snack should

contain some protein in order to heal. Eat a whole-foods, anti-inflammatory diet. Drink two or three glasses of veggie juice per day.

- **Avoid caffeine.** It whips your adrenal glands into a frenzy.
- **Avoid prolonged fasting or cleansing regimens until you are healed.** You can do a short one- or two-day vegetable-juice fast if you juice veggies with lots of greens. Wheatgrass juice is especially helpful. Prolonged juice fasting or intense detox programs can weaken you further.
- **Take a break.** We rarely take time to disconnect from technology—cellphones, the Internet, email and television. The problem is that our adrenal glands notice! Rather than being tired, wired and over-eating, slow down and restore balance to your adrenal glands—and your life. Take the Life Balance Quiz. You may think that by moving fast you will lose weight, but when stress levels are high and your adrenals are working overtime, you will stay in a perpetual cycle of gaining pounds.
- **Sleep.** Many people with adrenal fatigue complain of being tired all day then having trouble sleeping at night. If you are in a reverse circadian rhythm, this affects cortisol levels, causing irregular sleep patterns. You can correct this by eating less food late in the day, turning off all technology including television by 8 p.m. and by getting into bed and asleep by 10 p.m. Getting to sleep on the earlier side of midnight is much more restorative to your adrenals than sleep that begins later in the night, even if you sleep late the next morning to get in your full amount of sleep. The goal is to have eight to nine hours of sleep, so your body can rest and regulate your hormonal cycles.
- **Exercise.** Exercise can help you reduce stress, but only if it does not make you feel more tired. When you are exhausted, your adrenals are already working hard, and

heavy exercise can put added strain on them. The goal is to keep your heart rate under 90 beats per minute when working out. If you don't regularly exercise, walking 15 minutes once or twice a day after meals, outside in fresh air, makes your adrenal glands—and your mind and body—very happy. Also, check out the swing machine. It offers gentle exercise that is similar to jumping on a mini-trampoline and helps detoxify the lymphatic system. When I feel especially stressed, I spend about 10 to 15 minutes on it.

- **Get more exposure to natural sunlight.** This is good for your adrenal glands and boosts vitamin D. Make sure you don't burn, but use only coconut oil or natural sunscreen. Work up to 15 minutes of exposure three to four times per week.
- **Have fun.** Laugh and enjoy your life; it is a very important way to relax! Make relaxation and fun a priority; the benefits are amazing.
- **Breathe.** Deep breaths in and out of your nose can slow your heart rate and calm your entire body. Sometimes when we are under stress our breathing becomes shallow and fast. It only takes three or four deep breaths to feel better. Remember that slowing down your breath, as well as your life, even for a few minutes can make a big difference in reducing your stress level.

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