Cortisol: Is It Getting You Down?

You may know of it as **"the stress hormone**" because it is best known for being the hormone secreted by the adrenal glands during your body's automatic 'fight or flight' response to stress. Whether the stress is real or imagined, cortisol comes to the rescue by arming your body with more energy and more focus so that you can successfully deal with the threat at hand. But this automatic process was designed for temporary, short-lived situations, like running into a tiger in the wild, so that you can survive. It wasn't designed for the ongoing drain of our highly stressful culture.

Unfortunately, when your stress response is activated repeatedly and frequently, it doesn't get the chance to activate its own relaxation response, the 'deep breath' after a stressful event, so that your body can function normally again. In fact, as higher and more prolonged levels of cortisol enter the bloodstream, we may experience any of the following:

- Impaired cognitive performance
- Suppressed thyroid function
- Blood sugar imbalances such as hyperglycemia
- Decreased bone density
- Decrease in muscle tissue
- Higher blood pressure
- Lowered immunity and inflammatory responses in the body, slowed wound healing, and other health consequences
- Increased abdominal fat

What's the Emergency?

To prepare your body for 'fight or flight, cortisol increases your blood sugar levels (and thus energy levels), limits the effects of insulin, raises your blood pressure, and neutralizes inflammation so that you can respond effectively to the perceived threat. But not being able to turn the system "off" results in a number of undesirable conditions:

Insulin Secretion. A principal function of cortisol is to thwart the effect of insulin, so when cortisol levels are chronically elevated , the body remains in a general insulin-resistant state. Over time, the pancreas struggles to keep up with the high demand for insulin, glucose levels

in the blood remain high, the cells cannot get the sugar they need, and the cycle continues. It is thought that this mechanism can increase the risk for type 2 diabetes.

Depression. If you have excess cortisol in your bloodstream, this shuts down serotonin. When serotonin levels drop, depression can result. Depression is now on the rise nationally, even in children.

Insomnia. Excess cortisol reduces your production of the sleep hormone melatonin - a drop in melatonin leads to insomnia. Hello, Ambien! If you don't get enough sleep, you won't make enough HGH, the hormone that keeps you fit and young, since it is produced mostly during sleep. It's no wonder we are so sick—excessive sugar, poor sleep, and stress are constantly traumatizing us.

Lifestyle, Of Course

To keep cortisol levels healthy and under control, the body's relaxation response needs to be activated after a stressful experience. You can learn to relax your body with various stress management techniques, and you can make lifestyle changes in order to keep your body from reacting to stress in the first place. The following have been found by many to be very helpful in relaxing the body and mind, aiding the body in maintaining healthy cortisol levels:

- Guided Imagery
- Journaling
- Self-Hypnosis
- Exercise
- Yoga
- Listening to Music
- Breathing Exercises
- Meditation
- Sex
- Other Techniques