

ADAPTOGENS: ADRENAL RESCUE

Cortisol is a powerful stress hormone that promotes survival by priming the body during times of alarm/stress. While we are well-designed to weather occasional episodes of stress, we are not meant to sustain ongoing lifestyles filled with stress. After strong surges of adrenaline and cortisol, the body needs time to focus and repair. We often don't have the required balance in our lives to allow this latter recovery phase to take place. The impact over time? Exhaustion and chronic disease.

We need sufficient cortisol for energy production and to prime our receptors for all other hormones. In this way, cortisol really is a master hormone. But as with most powerful substances, there is a sweet spot. Both too little and too much can create issues. Enter the gift of adaptogenic herbs! Metabolites from these powerful plants can slow down or speed up the cortisol metabolism or modify receptor behavior in order to optimize hormone action. Adaptogens work to normalize cortisol levels – just one of their many potent functions. Adaptogens can help us during the day and also at night.

Sufficient and restful sleep is a critical element of any health improvement plan, especially for weight loss and stress/anxiety reduction. However, many people struggle to get to sleep and/or to stay asleep soundly and at length. Our stress levels can push our adrenal glands to secrete more cortisol during the day (or even at night!). Cortisol protects us when we are stressed, but it also drains our energy and can keep us awake at night. Over time, ongoing stress can inhibit cortisol production and expose our body to the damaging effects of chronic stress. Adaptogens are safe, effective choices for normalizing cortisol and fortunately are abundantly available from herbs.

Russian researcher Professor Israel Brekman established the definition of adaptogens. They increase the general capacity of the human body to adapt to stress and increase resistance to disease. Their effects are generally not localized to a specific body organ but have a normalizing effect (restorative rather than curative) on the imbalances caused by physical or emotional stress. We focus here on cortisol, but the entire hormonal axis (HPATG) is influenced by adaptogens.

Some common sources of physical stress include:

- Chronic pain, acute injury, any surgery
- Infection (all types, acute or chronic)
- Environmental toxins
- Lack of sleep, sleep apnea, snoring
- Extreme exercise
- Exposure to allergens or food sensitivities
- Poor diet (inflammatory, high glycemic, nutrient-poor, etc.)

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Some common sources of emotional stress include:

- Workaholism
- Worry, rumination, fretting
- Anxiety and/or depression
- Emotional trauma
- Death of a loved one

All adaptogens influence cortisol function. Some, however, have a more boosting tendency while others have a more calming or suppressive tendency. For inverted cortisol rhythms (e.g. high levels in the PM and low levels in the AM), a blend of both types usually works well. As is true with all herbs, each individual can have unexpected reactions to its use, so adaptogens should be started one at a time and at lower doses to find the best fit for the individual. Many are not recommended for those who are pregnant or breastfeeding. Calming adaptogens may have an additive effect with sedative medications and anesthesia (so should be stopped two weeks before surgery).

Generally boosting energy impact (for those with low cortisol):

- **Licorice:** perhaps the most potent in this effect. This herb may also help to reduce elevated testosterone levels (e.g. common in PCOS). The whole licorice extract is needed for this effect (vs. the deglycyrrhizinated (DGL) form used for gut healing). This herb is contraindicated for anyone with unmanaged hypertension and overuse can lead to low potassium levels.
- **Cordyceps:** Chinese mushroom that increases tissue oxygen uptake and may be beneficial for hypoxia stress. Provides energy and can boost athletic performance and has antioxidant properties as well. Since this is a mushroom, avoid in those with mushroom allergies or sensitivities or those with yeast or mold issues. Avoid use for anyone with bleeding disorders or on blood thinners and those undergoing surgery (stopped at least two weeks before).
- **Eleuthero/Siberian Ginseng:** this stimulating herb promotes energy and stamina; since it can increase heart rate and blood pressure, avoid its use in those with hypertension. Also, caution is advised in using in any hormone-sensitive conditions (e.g. hormonal cancers, uterine fibroids, endometriosis). Eleuthero has many drug interactions, so check those carefully.
- **Rhodiola:** a good choice to counteract the mental and physical effects of stress as well as depression. This potent herb improves energy levels naturally by promoting synthesis of ATP, the primary energy source for all cells in the body. It can improve mood and mental clarity as well. It can be drying at higher doses (500 mg/day), so avoid in those with dry eye, dry nose, dry skin, and vaginal dryness. It is contraindicated in those with bipolar spectrum disorders.

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Generally calming impact (for those with high cortisol)

- **Holy Basil:** the most revered of all the Ayurvedic herbs, Holy Basil is not related to the basil we grow in our gardens. Also known as Tulsi, Holy Basil has been used to lower elevated cortisol and regulate blood sugar. It has many other health benefits. It is available in tea, supplement, or tincture. Not for those pregnant, trying to conceive, or using anticoagulants.
- **L-Theanine:** This amino acid found in green tea is very calming and often used for anxiety. It increases brain levels of serotonin, dopamine, and GABA. This herb is safe for children.
- **Ashwagandha:** the herb that has been shown to increase energy and mental alertness during the day has also been shown in research to help you sleep better at night if there is elevated overnight cortisol. Caution is recommended in those with autoimmune diseases, and may impact thyroid hormone levels. Stop use two weeks before surgery.
- **Lemon balm:** also called *Melissa officinalis*, this herb has a calming effect and has been shown to improve sleep quality. Also helpful for calming anxiety.
- **Magnolia:** enhances the activity of GABA_A receptors in the brain, inducing a sense of calm and promoting sleep. Stop use two weeks before surgery.
- **Skullcap:** activates GABA_A receptors and modulates both slow-wave and REM sleep; helpful for stress-related insomnia. Not for kids, or women who are pregnant or breastfeeding.

Beyond single herbs, many great adaptogenic herb blends are available as well.

For example:

- Energy Vitality or Adrenal Health by Gaia Herbs
- Adrenal Optimizer by Jarrow
- Cortisol Calm by Pure Encapsulations
- Theanine Serine by Source Naturals

Excerpts from https://bodyecology.com/articles/reduce_your_cortisol_levels.php