

Cortisol and Stress: How to Stay Healthy

by Dr. Ryan Baker, DC

Cortisol is an important hormone in the body, secreted by the adrenal glands and involved in the following functions: proper glucose metabolism, regulation of blood pressure, insulin release for blood sugar maintenance, immune function, and inflammatory response.

Normally, it's present in the body at higher levels in the morning and at its lowest at night. Although stress isn't the only reason that Cortisol is secreted into the bloodstream. Cortisol has been termed "the stress hormone" because it's also secreted in higher levels during the body's "fight or flight" response to stress. Cortisol is responsible for several stress-related changes in the body.

Small increases of Cortisol have some positive effects: a quick burst of energy for survival reasons, heightened memory, increased immunity, and lower threshold to pain.

While Cortisol is an important and helpful part of the body's response to stress, it's important that the body is able to enter into the relaxation phase so that it can return to normal levels. Unfortunately, in our current high-stress culture, the body's stress response is activated so often that we often don't have a chance to return to normal, producing chronic stress.

Higher and more prolonged levels of Cortisol in the bloodstream have been shown to have negative effects such as 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 increase in abdominal fat.

To keep Cortisol levels healthy and under control, the body's relaxation response should be activated after the fight or flight response occurs. 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, and aiding the body in maintaining healthy Cortisol levels: exercise, yoga, Pilates, breathing exercises, listening to music, meditation, and many others.

Cortisol secretion varies among individuals. People are biologically "wired" to react differently to stress. One person may secrete higher levels of Cortisol than another in the same situation. Studies have also shown that people who secrete higher levels of Cortisol in response to stress also tend to eat more food, and food that is higher in carbohydrates than people who secrete less Cortisol. If you're more sensitive to stress, it's especially important for you to learn stress management techniques and maintain a low-stress lifestyle.

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