How to Balance Your Cortisol Levels

The “stress hormone” cortisol is essential for energy and health, but when it’s out of balance, you are, too. Learn how to manage low cortisol levels and high cortisol levels to keep inflammation, cravings, and belly fat at bay. Cortisol has a bad reputation. It is produced, in part, by the adrenal glands when we’re under pressure or perceive a threat. The pituitary gland determines how much hormone the adrenals should release to help us fight or flee. This alarm system works beautifully — until it doesn’t. In today’s fast-paced culture, many of us are overworked, under rested, and under pressure from too many obligations, and the alarm never stops.

It’s this state of chronic agitation that triggers cortisol function to run amok, contributing to a host of problems: insomnia, excess belly fat, anxiety, and extreme fatigue, to name just a few. It’s no wonder cortisol has gotten a lot of bad press in the health media. Yet without it we’re helpless.

The hormone isn’t produced solely in response to stress; chronic stress just puts it into overdrive. Normal levels are critical for maintaining steady energy throughout the day. And cortisol orchestrates the performance of other key hormones, like estrogen, testosterone and thyroid. Cortisol is the “control system” for hormones. It’s getting your blood pressure up only when it needs to be up, and raises your blood sugar only when you most need it. It modulates your immune system.

Optimally performing cortisol follows a pattern called the “cortisol curve.” In a healthy curve, cortisol is high in the morning and tapers off through the day and evening — like a slow-release energy pill that wears off just in time for bed. But when we’re chronically stressed, the body releases cortisol at all hours. The curve turns into a roller coaster, and excess cortisol causes us to develop a hair-trigger response to stress. This can lead to adrenal exhaustion.

High cortisol levels wreak havoc over time, deplete your happy brain chemicals like serotonin, rob your sleep, and make you store fat, especially in your belly. High cortisol is likewise linked to depression and food addiction. Imbalances can also lead to inflammation and thyroid issues. These problems can be fixed. And though restoring a smooth cortisol curve takes a little time and effort, the results are well worth it.

Cortisol Gone Rogue

In an ideal world, cortisol is highest in the morning, helping us stay focused during the day. It gradually tapers off through the afternoon and evening. But if your energy starts to run low during familiar activities it could be a warning that your cortisol pattern is disrupted. Catching more colds or having a shorter emotional fuse are other early signs.

Here are some of the common patterns malfunctioning cortisol levels tend to follow. All of them can overlap, but most often they occur in progression. After a prolonged period of producing extra cortisol, the adrenals eventually get fatigued and quit making the hormone. A healthy curve begins with cortisol levels highest in the morning, but not hours before dawn. Cortisol levels are normally lowest around 3 a.m., then begin to rise, peaking around 8 a.m.

Patterns of Cortisol Dysfunction

High Early-Morning Cortisol Levels
If you routinely wake up hours before dawn in a state of anxiety, your cortisol is overachieving and spiking too early.

High Cortisol Levels Throughout the Day
Cortisol spikes in response to stressors like work deadlines, environmental pollution, and inadequate sleep. Ongoing high levels of cortisol can be caused by too much coffee, a lack of carbs throughout the day, or an intensive focus on schedules. If cortisol levels stay elevated, you’re wired but your adrenals are getting tired.

High Evening Cortisol Levels
If you often find yourself in heated political arguments online at 9 p.m., or if you do heavy training at the gym in the evenings, it’s likely that your cortisol levels are skyrocketing at night — right when you want them to be coming down.

Low Cortisol Levels Throughout the Day
After cortisol has been elevated for an extended period, it can drop off completely. When it does, you feel flatlined. This usually signals adrenal exhaustion, when the overworked glands have shut down. You’re dragging through each day, even after plenty of sleep.

How to Get Control Back of Your Cortisol Curve

Cycle Carbs

A low-carb diet is great for losing weight, but it is not ideal if you have disrupted cortisol. High carb meals drop the **cortisol** whereas lower-carb meals allow the cortisol to stay higher.

To reset your **cortisol**, eat a low-carb breakfast, moderate amounts of healthy carbs in the afternoon, and higher amounts of healthy carbs (but NOT bread or pasta) in the evening. But avoiding carbs altogether can cause **cortisol** to stay elevated when you want it to come down. Punt your healthy carbs to later in the day.

Supplement Your Nutrition

There is no single supplement that can reset your **cortisol**, but there are 3 nutrients that play an essential role:

Omega 3 fatty acids (fish oil of flaxseed) 3,000 mg daily
Vitamin C 1,000 mg daily
Vitamin B_5 part of a B-complex

These three supplements have been shown to lower **cortisol** levels and can be used as a low-risk treatment for chronic stress.

Stay Hydrated

We are more likely to become dehydrated under stress and not only because we might neglect drinking water. Feeling anxious raises our heart rate and triggers faster, heavier breathing, both of which lead to fluid loss. Even if you are drinking plenty of water, you can still get dehydrated when you are stressed. The water may not be getting into your cells and may be just going right through you.

Just Relax

Your adrenals don't care if stress is mental or physical. Their job is to protect you when you are endangered. They will pump out **cortisol** whenever you are agitated and threatened—at least until they burn out! But when you learn to calm the mind and regain a sense of control, the sympathetic nervous system stays quiet.

Finding a "spiritual practice" will be an antidote to a constant state of alarm. Find a practice that makes you feel connected and centered. It could be praying, doing yoga, walking through the woods, or taking five minutes to quietly listen to the sounds around you. Relaxation practices are beneficial any time of day, regardless of your **cortisol** pattern, but they are especially helpful in the evenings to promote better sleep.

Time Your Workouts

We have been taught that *intense exercise* is a great way to de-stress. However, intense exercise raises **cortisol** levels, which is great if you are looking for an extra energy boost in the morning or midafternoon. But an evening or nighttime workout may not be beneficial if it's prompting insomnia or anxiety.

This does NOT mean you have to ditch your evening workout if that's the only time you have. But recognize that a schedule shift could help you reset your **cortisol**. Try changing that evening spin class to a yoga class or other meditative practice.

Get some sleep

Rest is key to restoring a healthy cortisol curve. Even when you still have a lot of work to do or are not sleepy, it's best just to go to bed anyway. Going from 8 hours of sleep to only 6 a night can cause big disruptions in your cortisol patterns in less than two weeks.