

How to Avoid Holiday Season “Burn-out”

“Tis the season to be jolly”. Yes it is! However, I hear many people tell me they are tired and stressed-out during the holiday season with too many obligations and commitments and a lack of energy to get everything done.

“Burn-out”, otherwise known as “adrenal fatigue”, occurs when the body undergoes excess stress under prolonged periods of time. Stress, whether it is physical, mental, or emotional, causes the adrenal glands to produce excess cortisol and adrenalin. These stress hormones give the body a boost of energy, but, after prolonged periods of time, the over-worked adrenal glands become fatigued and symptoms of “burn-out” occur as the body can no longer produce adequate amounts of cortisol and adrenalin.

The symptoms of adrenal fatigue include:

- Difficulty getting out of bed in the morning
- Cravings for salty and sugary foods
- Lethargy: Everything seems like a chore, even the things you used to enjoy
- Decreased sex drive
- Decreased ability to handle stress (ex. road rage, constant anxiety, compulsive eating, drinking, smoking, or drug use)
- Increased time to recover from illness (ex. Colds linger on much longer and occur more frequently than usual)
- Light-headed or dizzy when standing up quickly
- Mild depression
- Increased PMS (ex. Bloating, tired, crabby, cramping, and cravings for chocolate)
- Memory less accurate
- Ringing in the ears

If more than a few of these symptoms sound familiar to you, then they are warning signs that something needs to change as soon as possible (ie. diet, lifestyle, stressors) if you want to feel well again.

Diet plays a critical role in restoring adrenal function. Eating frequent meals (every 3-4 hours) and reducing sugar and caffeine helps keep cortisol levels stable. When sugar and caffeine are consumed, cortisol levels spike up, giving you an immediate boost of energy. However, an hour or two later, cortisol levels crash, causing fatigue and cravings for more sugar and caffeine. A whole foods diet, consisting of plenty of vegetables, complex carbohydrates and proteins at each meal will help to keep energy and cortisol levels consistent. With the holidays around the corner, most people are eating more sugar than usual. Try making your holiday treats with natural sweeteners such as stevia, xylitol, organic honey, or whole cane sugar. These natural sweeteners do not spike blood sugars to the same extent as white sugar. I recommend the book “The Whole Life Nutrition Cookbook” by Segersten and Malterre for excellent dairy free and gluten free recipes using natural organic sweeteners (I carry this book in my clinic).

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Certain vitamins play a key role in restoring adrenal function. Vitamins B and C are the most important. These should be taken with breakfast to sustain energy throughout the day. People with severe adrenal fatigue can also benefit from herbs such as ginseng and licorice root. These can be used in the raw form and boiled to create a tea. (Beware if you have high blood pressure since licorice can increase blood pressure). Licorice tea is a delicious tea to have during the holidays to sustain energy and cortisol levels, and in addition has anti-viral properties (which may help prevent flu and illness).

Everyone copes with stress differently. There are positive and negative coping patterns. Negative coping patterns include over-eating, over-spending, watching too much TV, smoking, excessive alcohol use, and drug use. Focus on identifying those negative patterns and replacing them with positive ones. Positive coping patterns include relaxation techniques, exercise, learning how to say “no”, getting more sleep, and making more time for oneself. Finding a walking or jogging buddy with whom to start a regular exercise routine can be an excellent opportunity to rid the body of stress and to increase fitness levels. Find a few minutes each day to do deep breathing exercises. This will help calm the whole body and prevent anxiety. Yoga is another excellent way to lower stress levels and improve overall health.

Now is a great time to start making your New Year’s resolutions. Naturopathic doctors focus on preventative medicine to optimize health, energy, and well-being. Each patient receives individualized meal plans as well as vitamin/herbal formulas to foster optimal weight management and energy levels. Intravenous (IV) vitamin injections can help boost energy for those with adrenal fatigue, compromised digestive function, or those with depressed immune systems. Acupuncture and/or Bowen therapy along with deep breathing exercises are helpful to lower stress levels and re-balance the adrenal glands.