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Carbs, Coffee, & Cortisol...



By: Dr. Alan Christianson

Day to day, you and I encounter many variables that affect our cortisol levels. From daily stress to the foods we eat—all can and do affect the way our adrenals function, and, consequently the way you feel and even sleep.

Let's tackle a few questions to give you some understanding about your adrenals and how to lead yourself back to health.

When And Why Do Cortisol Patterns Go Awry?

A big distinction needs to be made between adrenal disease and dysregulation. Cortisol disease is pretty rare. There are two main ones:



Addison's disease and Cushing's disease. These two diseases affect 1-2 people per million.

The conventional medical world argues that since adrenal diseases aren't common, the adrenal glands can't malfunction. On the contrary, adrenal dysregulation is real and quite common.

Adrenal dysregulation means the patterns of our lives and stressors cause the timing of adrenal function to no longer serve our best interests. Some of the main stressors are:

- pressures of life
- mental and emotional stress
- pollutants
- chemicals like BPA or phthalates from plastics
- metals (like mercury)
- processed foods

For example, fructose can cause the body to make more cortisol within visceral fat than it would otherwise.

Another big factor is our being out of rhythm with the sun. Having artificial light throughout the day, instead of normal dawn and dusk, changes our cortisol rhythms.

Are There Different Strategies For Correcting Different Patterns?

Yes, there are. About one-hundred years ago, Dr. Hans Selye described the main stress response, known as the flight or fight response. He described the first stage as an over-production of stress hormones. He called that "stage one". I call that the "stress stage".

Stage two is where these hormones are made at counterproductive times. I call this stage "wired and tired".

Stage three is when not many hormones are being produced anymore, and I call this stage "crashed".

Strategies to correct these patterns differ per stage. Herbal adaptogens and some of the mind-body therapies can be most effective when targeted to a particular adrenal stage.

Is Carb Cycling Helpful Regardless of the Adrenal Stage?

In my book, [THE ADRENAL RESET DIET](#), I wrote about a clinical trial I conducted. Everyone who participated in the trial was at some stage of adrenal dysfunction. Those at *every* stage saw movement back to healthy cortisol rhythms, using the carb-cycling strategy.

The general idea is that carbs elevate blood sugar more than other food categories. They elevate blood sugar more than protein, fat, and even non-caloric foods. When you elevate your blood sugar, you cause your body to make more insulin to manage the increase. Imagine insulin and cortisol on a seesaw. When one gets higher, the other gets lower. Higher carbs push cortisol down. Lower carb meals allow cortisol to stay higher.

So, the idea is by having a lower carb breakfast, you can sustain higher morning cortisol, which is desirable to a point. You cannot elevate an appropriate cortisol level, but you can allow it to move to a good range if it's suppressed.

At midday, cortisol is basically neutral, so you intake a moderate amount of carbs. What we are doing at this point is supporting the gradual reduction of cortisol.

In the evening, you are enjoying a meal higher in good, healthy carbs. The idea with this is we are supporting the appropriate shutdown of cortisol, which allows you good, restorative sleep. (It turns out that quality sleep may be a bigger factor for long-term weight loss than even diet or exercise.) If you simply avoid carbs, sleep quality suffers.

When you don't eat enough carbs in the evening to go deeper into sleep, your body gets hypoglycemic. Your body needs glucose for your brain and muscles to function. You'll make glucose by breaking down your muscles, and you need cortisol to do this. So, when you're too low in your carbs, you raise cortisol, pull your muscles apart, and make glucose out of that. When this happens, your cortisol level elevates higher than it should. This is a real problem in the evening.

What is the Relation Between Coffee and Cortisol?

Coffee inhibits cortisol reduction. Some people are more sensitive to it, so it makes their nervous system more responsive to cortisol. It would be incorrect and oversimplified to say coffee raises cortisol, but if you have it in your body, it's harder to lower your own cortisol levels.

Many people are genetically hardwired to have a higher stress response to coffee, and it can become more of a crutch than a pleasure. The funny thing is that caffeine has effects on boosting your energy, mental clarity, and performance; however, these effects only show up in those who don't drink coffee regularly.

Those who drink coffee regularly don't see a measurable increase in performance. They feel like their performance is going up only because they're having withdrawal symptoms removed by their daily coffee dose. So, they're not actually getting smarter, sharper, or more energized—they're just getting less of the withdrawal symptoms from the last dose having worn off. It's a smart strategy to skip drinking coffee a few days per week. Your body has greater energy production by doing so.

Discover at what stage your adrenals are currently functioning in Dr. Christianson's New York Times Bestselling book, [THE ADRENAL RESET DIET](#). You'll also discover detailed, practical help to restore your adrenals to optimal function, taking you from surviving to thriving!



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Dr. Alan Christianson is an Arizona-based Naturopathic Physician who helps people overcome adrenal and thyroid disorders and achieve lasting fat loss. He authored the New York Times' bestselling Adrenal Reset Diet, and The Complete Idiot's Guide to Thyroid Disease. Dr. Christianson is the founding physician behind Integrative Health.

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