

## WHAT IS CORTISOL?

Cortisol is the primary stress hormone and a chemical messenger released during times of stress to prepare your body for the “fight-or-flight” response to a perceived threat.

Continuously elevated cortisol levels caused by chronic stress can be hugely detrimental to our health for a number of reasons that we will explore.

Without cortisol, we could not live. Yet, with too much cortisol, life can feel unlivable. Let’s look into how to find that proper balance.



## A LITTLE GOES A LONG WAY

Cortisol is valuable for making energy available in the body while inhibiting pain during brief periods of stress. However, elevated levels of cortisol over the long-term can result in numerous health complications:

- Anxiety & depression
- Digestive problems
- Heart disease
- Poor sleep
- Weight gain
- Impaired memory and concentration
- Increased blood sugar (and risk of diabetes)

## SIGNS OF HIGH STRESS & CORTISOL LEVELS

The following are the most common signs and symptoms of prolonged elevated levels of stress and cortisol. **Place a check mark next to those that have impacted you recently.**

- Sudden change of appetite
- Sudden weight gain, especially in abdomen
- Change in sleep habits; insomnia
- Increased occurrence of infections; ulcers
- Digestive issues
- Abnormally high blood pressure
- Frequent tension headaches or migraines
- Impotence or abnormal menstrual cycles
- Difficulty with memory and concentration
- Joint and/or muscle pain

*How would you rate your stress, or stress-related symptoms on a scale of 1 (no stress) to 10 (extremely high stress levels)?*

### Coach's Quick Take

**Long term elevated levels of cortisol from chronic stress can result in many health issues.**

**Speak with your Wellness Coach to discuss recent symptoms and begin a plan to reduce your stress levels.**



### Go to Bed Early - or Take a Nap!

It is imperative to get adequate sleep and give your body enough time to recover from the day's stresses. Some studies show significantly increased cortisol levels in those sleeping 6 hours or less, compared to those sleeping the recommended 8 hours each night. If you have an occasional late night, a midday nap (no more than 20 minutes) may help reduce your cortisol levels.



### Play Some Music!

Studies suggest that music can have a calming effect on the brain, especially during times of high stress. Instead of watching TV or playing on your tablet before bed, try listening to something soothing.

## RESOLVING THE PUZZLE OF YOUR STRESS & CORTISOL LEVELS



### Work It Out!

Regular exercise, particularly aerobic exercise, has been scientifically proven to reduce stress and many of its ill effects. It is recommended that adults participate in at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity (such as brisk walking, jogging, or swimming) per week. Strength training also helps to reduce stress when done properly. Speak with your Wellness Coach to discuss the best exercise program for you.

### Pop In a Piece of Chewing Gum!

Studies suggest that chewing gum when stressed can help diffuse tension. Salivary cortisol levels of those who chewed gum while under moderate stress were noticeably lower than those who did not. They also reported greater levels of alertness.



### Practice Deep Breathing/Meditation

Deep breathing, meditation and yoga have been shown to reduce stress and cortisol levels when practiced on a regular basis.

- When caught in a tough moment, inhale slowly for a count of 4 seconds, and hold for 3 seconds before slowly exhaling. Concentrate on expanding your abdomen rather than your chest as you inhale.
- After a long day of work, turn off the lights and TV, lie back on your couch, relax all of your muscles, starting with your head and ending with your toes, and concentrate on each breath.
- Try a yoga class with a friend or colleague before or after work, or during your lunch break.

### Try the Anti-Inflammatory Diet

Chronic inflammation, caused by poor diet and stress, contributes to high levels of cortisol and decreased immune function. *Which changes are you willing to try to reduce inflammation?*

- Reduce refined carbohydrates, such as white bread, white rice, and baked goods.
- Increase consumption of vegetables, fruit, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and beans.
- Increase intake of omega-3 fatty acids found in fish (catfish, halibut, salmon, striped sea bass, and albacore tuna), canola oil, walnuts, and tofu.
- Eliminate trans fats and minimize saturated fats.
- Cease or reduce caffeine and alcohol intake.



Resources: [www.todaydietitian.com](http://www.todaydietitian.com); [www.prevention.com](http://www.prevention.com); [www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org)