

What Is Adrenal Fatigue and Why Is It Controversial?

A diagnosis by any other name might be more respected.

By Anna Medaris Miller, Staff Writer | June 20, 2017, at 1:35 p.m.



Unrecognized in the medical community, adrenal gland isn't detectable with standard blood tests. (GETTY IMAGES)

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Angela Rocchio was doing everything right: She was sleeping eight hours a night, eating healthfully and practicing yoga, which she also taught. But Rocchio, who was in her mid-20s at the time and working as an environmental specialist, was perpetually exhausted, developing severe allergies, struggling with blood sugar control and [facing infertility](#).

"I didn't understand why this was happening to me," says Rocchio, who saw multiple doctors over many years and received few answers. "I thought, 'Is this just my life?'"

It wasn't until Rocchio, now 37, [saw an acupuncturist](#) that she learned it didn't have to be. After conducting hormone tests, the provider told her she had adrenal fatigue, an unofficial diagnosis used to describe symptoms thought to be caused by overly taxed adrenal glands, usually due to [chronic stress](#). Since the glands produce hormones that affect reproduction, sleep patterns, energy regulation and stress response, when they're not fully functioning, people can experience symptoms like unrelenting fatigue, [food cravings](#), headaches, irritability and a weak immune system, the theory goes.

"Our flight-or-fight system is well-built for physical stressors like running away from something that's trying to kill you ... those hormones [of the adrenal glands] help us get

through an acute stressor," explains [Dr. Chad Larson](#), a naturopathic doctor in Solana Beach, California, and advisor on the clinical consulting team for Cyrex Laboratories. "Most of us today, our stressors aren't acute stressors; they're mental, emotional stressors – and they're chronic and they're tapping the adrenals over and over again and they start to dysregulate, and that can lead to a cascade of symptoms."

For Rocchio, the diagnosis "was like this miracle," she says. "It was all making sense; I understood what was at the heart of the condition, and I was able to end my struggle in less than six months."

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It's not clear how many people have adrenal fatigue, since its symptoms are common and its definition open to interpretation. What's more, the condition isn't recognized in the medical community since, unlike Addison's disease – a disorder in which the adrenal glands don't produce enough hormones – adrenal fatigue isn't detectable with standard blood tests, says [Dr. Robert Danoff](#), an osteopathic family physician and residency program director at Aria Health System in Philadelphia.

"What people are saying is that the adrenal gland is not producing enough cortisol, while it's still producing enough that it shows up in the blood work," he says. "Most of us will call it 'chronic stress.'" One [review of 58 studies](#) published last year in BMC Endocrine Disorders even concluded that, "so far, there is no proof or demonstration of the existence of 'AF.'"

But naturopaths and other wellness professionals say that just because someone's adrenals appear to be functioning doesn't mean they're not worn out. "In standard medicine, the adrenals are really seen as healthy or diseased – there's no gray area in between; it's black and white," says Larson, who often uses salivary tests to detect lower hormone levels. "In functional medicine, we see it as multiple shades of gray with the adrenals."

[Fawne Hansen](#), a health coach in Vancouver, British Columbia, and coauthor of "The Adrenal Fatigue Solution," says the name "adrenal fatigue" doesn't help its perceived legitimacy. "People understand the concepts of 'burning the candle at both ends' or experiencing 'burnout.' This is surprisingly difficult to measure, which leads some people to say that it doesn't exist," Hansen says. "However, most people understand intuitively that chronic stress eventually depletes their energy levels, and that's really what we're talking about."

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Whether called adrenal fatigue, chronic stress or HPA (Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenals) Axis Dysfunction – Hansen's preferred term since it encompasses the many glands and hormones that can be affected by chronic stress – most practitioners of all backgrounds

agree that treating its symptoms begins with making lifestyle changes to address the root causes of chronic stress.

"The more pieces of the puzzle ... we can put together, the faster, the longer-lasting the treatment is going to be," says Larson, who recommends patients [eliminate added sugars](#) and boost their [protein intake at breakfast](#) to help control blood sugar and reset cortisol function. He also recommends stress-management techniques like deep breathing and meditation using apps like Headspace.

"We have to look at the whole picture," agrees Danoff, who tells patients to keep a two-week diary of their eating and exercise patterns, sleep schedules and social engagements to shed light on how those behaviors affect their everyday functioning. Then he helps them make adjustments accordingly, say, by cutting back on unnecessary responsibilities.

"Empower yourself to say no and set limits on projects or commitments because if a person feels overwhelmed, then they just spiral and lose efficiency," he says.

Such advice is what helped Rocchio heal. While she appeared to be living a health-conscious life, she learned that her tendency to focus more on checking off to-do lists over living mindfully was running her ragged. "No matter what I did, I had to do it to the extreme, whether it was working out or extracurricular activities or sports or my work, despite whether it was making me happy and also making me sick," she says.

[See: [8 Unexpected Signs You're Stressed.](#)]

So Rocchio, who lives in Santa Cruz, California, worked with mentors to make lifestyle changes to help her slow down. She incorporated an evening gratitude practice, [prioritized meditation](#) and breath work, embraced whole foods and began eating regularly and mindfully. She's since become a mom, health and lifestyle counselor, mindfulness coach and co-founder of [Heal Your Adrenal Fatigue](#), a multidisciplinary wellness practice for people struggling with similar symptoms.

Her message? "It's not normal and there are answers, because a lot of people are really overwhelmed and frustrated and hopeless because the condition isn't always recognized," she says. "I wanted to help people recover, and recover in a way that was sustainable; that was actually going to give long-standing results."



[Anna Medaris Miller](#) STAFF WRITER

Anna Medaris Miller is a Health & Wellness editor at U.S. News, where she writes consumer advice stories on fitness, nutrition, reproductive health, medical conditions, mental health and more. She also manages the Eat+Run blog and frequently appears as a health expert on local and national radio and TV shows. Prior to joining U.S. News, Anna wrote

for The Washington Post, The Muse and Monitor on Psychology magazine, where she served as associate editor. Anna is a graduate of the University of Michigan and American University, where she earned her master's degree in interactive journalism in 2014. Follow her on [Twitter](#) or email her at amiller@usnews.com.