Is Your Pain Caused by Stress?

By Dr. Ramona Warren

Do you experience chronic low back pain? Are your knees painful? Do you suffer with plantar fasciitis, shin splints or Achilles tendonitis? Is it harder for you to get up from a chair because your legs feel weak, or do you have difficulty climbing stairs without feeling winded? Any of these symptoms may be caused by chronic stress.

It is estimated that 75 to 90 percent of doctor visits are related to stress. The leading causes of death, which include heart disease, cancer, stroke, respiratory disease and accidents, are all associated with stress. There is not a single person who hasn’t experienced stress at some point in their lives. For many, stress is an ongoing problem, and this is where the trouble begins.

Our bodies are designed to handle stress. The adrenal glands, also known as our stress glands, are small glands that sit on top of each kidney. Although these glands are small in size, they play a powerful role in our health. The adrenal glands produce several powerful hormones that affect every tissue in your body, while also impacting the way you think and feel. Among other things, these adrenal hormones help provide energy to the body, fight inflammation, balance blood sugar, maintain blood pressure and help regulate electrolytes. In short, the adrenal glands help us cope with stress so that we can maintain our health.

Chronic worry or anxiety will deplete the adrenal glands and lead to adrenal exhaustion. Additionally, physical stress, a diet low in nutrients, too much caffeine or alcohol, too much sugar or other inflammatory foods, can also negatively impact the adrenals.

When the adrenal glands are no longer able to keep up with the stresses of your life, the body will begin to exhibit a variety of warning signs, including:

* Pain-especially in the lower back, knee, foot and ankle
* Waking up with a mysterious lower back ache
* Arthritic tendencies
* Tired feet at the end of the day
* Plantar fasciitis
* Tendency to sprain ankles or have “shin splints”
* Feeling of “heaviness” in your legs
* Body "twitches" when trying to go to sleep
* Eyelid "twitches
* Fibromyalgia
* Inflammation such as arthritis, bursitis, tendonitis
* Dizzy when you stand up
* Brain fog
* Difficulty sleeping
* Wake up feeling tired, even after a good nights sleep
* Blood pressure imbalances

There are three phases of adrenal stress: acute phase, resistance phase and exhaustion phase. Once the person has reached the exhaustion phase, the body is stuck in a flight or fight response. The adrenal glands have “run out of energy,” and the person feels drained, tired and fatigued. The immune system becomes suppressed, which makes a person more susceptible to illness. Belly fat increases, skin becomes looser due to collagen breakdown, muscles on the backs of your arms develop “bat wings”, your thighs become more “flabby” and your neck begins to look like a turkey neck.

Many muscles that begin breaking down when the body is in adrenal exhaustion are associated with supporting the lower back, the knees and the feet. When these muscles become weaker, you become more susceptible to injury. This is how someone can suddenly “throw their back out” or wake up with unexplained back pain. Typically, the muscles have been imbalanced and the problem has been there long before the symptoms occur.

Why don't you hear about adrenal stress from your medical doctor? Conventional medicine looks for diseased states. Addison’s or Cushing’s Syndrome are the diseases related to the adrenal glands. Blood tests are one of the main tests doctors use to first diagnose these two adrenal conditions. However, the adrenal glands can be in a weakened state and functioning poorly without anything ever showing up on a standard blood test.

There is not a specific blood test to look at the health or function of the adrenal glands, and the “normal” ranges can be very broad. Also, the blood test will only look at what is going on in your blood at the specific time the blood was drawn. The adrenal glands have a rhythm, and levels of the hormones fluctuate at different times of the day. Doing a single blood test will not capture the true levels of adrenal hormones throughout the day. However, functional medicine doctors can perform tests to assess the function of the adrenal glands. In our office we use a saliva test. The saliva is collected at four different times in the day to assess the adrenal function throughout the day.

While there are many causes of low back pain, back pain from weak adrenal glands is more and more common due to the increased stresses we live with physically, emotionally and environmentally. To reduce your risk of adrenal fatigue, be sure to:

1. Eat a healthy diet that eliminates sugar and caffeine
2. Eat high-quality protein from grass-fed, free-range or wild-caught meats
3. Drink plenty of quality water
4. Get at least seven hours of sleep a night
5. Exercise in moderation, as high intensity or endurance exercise can be stressful to your body

Pay attention to the signs and symptoms your body is giving you so you can improve the health of your adrenal glands and help reduce the pain in your lower back, knees and feet.