

What Is Cortisol & Why Is It Important?

Think of cortisol as nature's built-in alarm system. It's your body's main stress hormone. It works with certain parts of your brain to control your mood, motivation, and fear.

Your adrenal glands -- triangle-shaped organs at the top of your kidneys -- make cortisol.

Cortisol plays an important role in a number of things your body does. For example, it:

- ✔ Boosts energy so you can handle stress and restores balance afterward
- ✔ Manages how your body uses carbohydrates, fats, and proteins
- ✔ Keeps inflammation down
- ✔ Regulates your blood pressure
- ✔ Increases your blood sugar (glucose)
- ✔ Controls your sleep/wake cycle

How Does It Work?

Your hypothalamus and pituitary gland -- both located in your brain -- can sense if your blood contains the right level of cortisol. If the level is too low, your brain adjusts the amount of hormones it makes. Your adrenal glands pick up on these signals. Then, they fine-tune the amount of cortisol they release.

Cortisol receptors -- which are in most cells in your body -- receive and use the hormone in different ways. Your needs will differ from day to day. For instance, when your body is on high alert, cortisol can alter or shut down functions that get in the way. These might include your digestive or reproductive systems, your immune system, or even your growth processes.

Sometimes, your cortisol levels can get out of whack.



Too Much Stress

After the pressure or danger has passed, your cortisol level should calm down. Your heart, blood pressure, and other body systems will get back to normal.

But what if you're under constant stress and the alarm button stays on?

It can derail your body's most important functions. It can also lead to a number of health problems, including:

- **Anxiety and depression**
- **Headaches**
- **Heart disease**
- **Trouble Sleeping**
- **Memory and concentration problems**
- **Weight gain**
- **Problems with digestion**

So, with this in mind, managing your stress levels is clearly a health issue. Obviously it's one for your mental health, but it's also important for your physical health too. Everyone needs some head space, some self love, to experience joy and fun and feel loved. Seeking these things for yourself is not selfish – it's one of the basics of looking after your health. Looking after your own health is a major part of your responsibilities. There's a reason the signs on an aeroplane tell you to put your own mask on first in an emergency.... It's because you can't help those that depend on you if you go down first!

