

# Addison's Disease

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Addison's disease, or adrenal insufficiency, is a slow and progressive failure of adrenal gland function. Normally functioning adrenal glands produce hormones (such as cortisol) that help regulate a number of important body functions. In most cases, an autoimmune disorder (where the immune system attacks the adrenal glands) is the cause. Adrenal insufficiency can also occur in association with other hormone gland defects, which cause underactive thyroid or slow sexual development. Gradual loss of adrenal hormones will eventually produce symptoms, and in situations involving extra stress, such as an injury or infection, severe additional symptoms can develop. This abrupt worsening is called an Addisonian crisis, or acute adrenal insufficiency, and can be fatal if not treated. Your risk of adrenal insufficiency increases with stress, diabetes, surgery, anticoagulant (blood thinner) treatment, and abruptly discontinuing cortisone (e.g., prednisone) drugs or changing dosage abruptly.

Symptoms may include:

- Muscle weakness and fatigue
- Nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhea, and weight loss
- Craving for salty foods
- Low blood pressure, which may cause faintness and dizziness, especially with rising from lying or sitting positions
- Dark tanning of the skin on non-exposed areas and often more on scars, elbows and knees, lips, and skin folds
- Depression, anxiety, or irritability
- Abnormal or absent menstrual periods
- Acute Adrenal Insufficiency (Addisonian crisis) may cause:
  - Severe pain in the abdomen, low back or legs
  - Severe vomiting and diarrhea
  - Low blood pressure
  - Unconsciousness or coma

{mospagebreak title=What your doctor can do}

What your doctor can do:

- Diagnose the disease by asking about your symptoms and medical history and doing a physical exam.
- Order laboratory tests to assess cortisol levels like an ACTH stimulation test or an Insulin-induced hypoglycemia test.
- Order X-ray imaging of the adrenal glands and/or brain, including CT scans.

Treatment includes:

- Oral cortisone drugs, which need to be taken precisely as directed. You may be instructed how to increase your dose in times of stress or minor infection.
- An injectable form of cortisone, with needle and syringe, to give yourself in emergencies.
- Hospitalization for an acute adrenal crisis to receive intravenous (IV) fluids, glucose, and cortisone drugs.

{mospagebreak title=What you can do}

What you can do:

- Wear a medical identification bracelet or medal noting your condition with emergency treatment information. Contact: Medic Alert @ 1-800 825-3785 for more information.
- Notify all physicians or dentists that you have adrenal insufficiency.
- Obtain routine immunizations (influenza and pneumonia).
- Seek prompt medical attention for severe infections, vomiting or diarrhea.

What you can expect:

There is no cure, but symptoms can be controlled with treatment. It can be fatal if untreated.

Possible complications include adrenal crisis and increased susceptibility to infections.

Contact your doctor if you develop muscle pains, headache, or dizziness; signs of infection (fever, chills, muscle aches nausea, or vomiting); if you are going to have general anesthesia for surgery; or if you develop new symptoms or treatment side effects.