

What are Addison's disease and adrenal insufficiency?

Addison's disease, also known as primary adrenal insufficiency, is a rare endocrine condition where the adrenal glands are unable to produce steroid hormones essential for life. This condition affects roughly 1 in 10,000 people in the UK of different ages, and both genders.

Adrenal glands

The adrenal glands produce 3 essential steroid hormones.



Cortisol

Cortisol is life-essential. It helps control your metabolism, blood sugar, energy, appetite and stress.



Aldosterone

Aldosterone helps the body manage its blood pressure and salt/fluid balance.

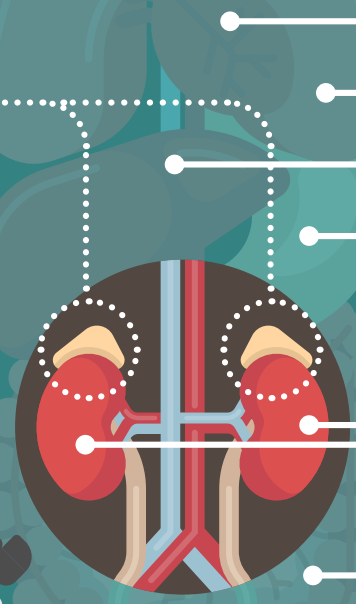


DHEA

DHEA is important to help give the body stamina and libido.

Your adrenal glands are each about the size of an acorn





SECONDARY AND TERTIARY ADRENAL INSUFFICIENCY

There are also two other types of adrenal insufficiency: **Secondary adrenal insufficiency** is caused by a problem within the pituitary gland, the part of the brain that 'controls' the adrenal glands. There are several different reasons why the pituitary gland might not work as it should.

Tertiary adrenal insufficiency can occur on stopping long-term steroid medication taken for other conditions.

Did you know?

People with Addison's disease can crave salty foods



SYMPTOMS OF ADRENAL INSUFFICIENCY

- Nausea and abdominal pain
- Low appetite and weight loss
- Weakness and fatigue
- Light-headedness and brain fog
- Skin can become darker or look tanned (undiagnosed Addison's disease)
- Salt craving (Addison's disease)



Without treatment, Addison's and adrenal insufficiency can lead to a life-threatening emergency called an **adrenal crisis**.

Without **time-critical emergency treatment** with hydrocortisone to replace the missing cortisol, an **adrenal crisis can be rapidly fatal**.



Emergency injection kit, emergency steroid card and medic alert wristbands

ADRENAL INSUFFICIENCY TREATMENT

Replacement steroid medication is time-critical, needing to be taken at certain times each day to replicate the body's natural steroid hormone production.

Under physical or psychological stress, such as illness, vomiting or trauma, the body has an increased need for cortisol, over and above replacement medication. This can lead to adrenal crisis. If medication is not being sufficiently absorbed e.g. due to vomiting or diarrhoea, it can also lead to adrenal crisis.

In these situations, people need to increase their medication with 'stress dosing' known as the 'Sick Day Rules', and may need to administer an emergency injection of hydrocortisone to prevent an adrenal crisis.

WHAT IS LIFE LIKE FOR PEOPLE WITH ADDISON'S AND ADRENAL INSUFFICIENCY?

Having a rare condition can be challenging, especially as it is an 'invisible disability'. Not all healthcare professionals have heard of or treated someone with adrenal insufficiency.

People with this condition need to become experts in their own health. They also need to carry a 'Steroid Dependent' emergency medical card, wear medical alert jewellery and always have an emergency injection kit with them, so that if needed, they can give themselves, or be given, an emergency dose of hydrocortisone.



President John F. Kennedy

Did you know?

President John F. Kennedy (JFK) had Addison's disease and his birthday, 29th May, is recognised as 'Addison's Disease Day' in the UK.

For further advice please contact: Email: enquiries@addisons.org.uk | Website: addisonsdisease.org.uk

The Addison's Disease Self-Help Group works to support people with Addison's and adrenal insufficiency and to promote better medical understanding of this rare condition.

The ADSHG is supported and advised by a Clinical Advisory Panel; a group of medical professionals with an interest in adrenal medicine. Registered charity 1179825, established 1984.

This poster has been authored by the ADSHG and reviewed by ADSHG Clinical Advisory Panel.

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