

# Health topics

## Addisons disease



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### What is Addison's disease?

Addison's disease is a disorder that occurs when the adrenal glands do not produce enough of their hormones.

The adrenal glands are small hormone-secreting organs located on top of each kidney. They consist of the outer portion (called the cortex) and the inner portion (called the medulla).

#### The cortex produces three types of hormones:

- ❖ The glucocorticoid hormones (such as cortisol) maintain sugar (glucose) control, decrease (suppress) body's immune response and help the body respond to stress
- ❖ The mineralocorticoid hormones (such as aldosterone) regulate sodium and potassium balance
- ❖ The sex hormones, androgens (male) and estrogens (female), affect sexual development and sex drive

### What causes it?

Addison's disease results from damage to the adrenal cortex. The damage causes the cortex to produce less of its hormones.

#### This damage may be caused by the following:

- ❖ The body's immune system mistakenly attacking the gland (autoimmune disease)
- ❖ Infections such as tuberculosis, HIV, or fungal infections
- ❖ Haemorrhage, blood loss
- ❖ Tumours
- ❖ Use of blood-thinning drugs (anticoagulants)

### What are the symptoms?

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| ❖ Changes in blood pressure or heart rate    | ❖ Fatigue  |
| ❖ Chronic diarrhoea                          | ❖ Loss of appetite                                       |
| ❖ Darkening of the skin - patchy skin colour | ❖ Mouth lesions on the inside of a cheek (buccal mucosa) |
| ❖ Unnaturally dark colour in some places     | ❖ Nausea and vomiting                                    |
| ❖ Paleness                                   | ❖ Salt craving   |
| ❖ Extreme weakness                           | ❖ Slow, sluggish movement                                |
|  | ❖ Unintentional weight loss                              |

### How is it diagnosed?

- ❖ Blood tests may show:
  - o Increased potassium
  - o Low cortisol level
  - o Low serum sodium
  - o Abnormal sex hormone levels
- ❖ Low blood pressure
- ❖ Radiology examinations may include:
  - o Abdominal x-ray
  - o Abdominal CT scan

## How can Addison's disease affect my health?

With hormone replacement therapy, most people with Addison's disease are able to lead normal lives.

Complications can occur if you take too little or too much adrenal hormone supplement.

**Complications also may result from the following related illnesses:**

- ❖ Diabetes
- ❖ Hashimoto's thyroiditis (chronic thyroiditis)
- ❖ Hypoparathyroidism
- ❖ Ovarian hypofunction or testicular failure
- ❖ Pernicious anaemia
- ❖ Thyrotoxicosis

## Treatment

Treatment with replacement corticosteroids will control the symptoms of this disease. However, you will usually need to take these drugs for life. People often receive a combination of glucocorticoids (cortisone or hydrocortisone) and mineralocorticoids (fludrocortisone).

**The health care provider may increase the medication dose in times of:**

- ❖ Infection
- ❖ Injury
- ❖ Stress

During an extreme form of adrenal insufficiency, adrenal crisis, you must inject hydrocortisone immediately. Supportive treatment for low blood pressure is usually needed as well.

## Your role in managing this condition

- ❖ Never skip doses of your medication for this condition, because life-threatening reactions may occur
- ❖ Some people with Addison's disease are taught to give themselves an emergency injection of hydrocortisone during stressful situations
- ❖ It is important for you to always carry a medical identification card that states the type of medication and the proper dose needed in case of an emergency. Additionally, your health care provider may advise you to always wear a Medic-Alert tag (such as a bracelet) alerting health care professionals that you have this condition in case of emergency
- ❖ Make sure you take your medicines as prescribed by your doctor

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