

Stress & Cortisol 101

Understanding your stress hormone, how it affects your body, and what you can do to bring it back into balance.



What is Cortisol?

Cortisol is your body's primary **stress hormone**, produced by the adrenal glands. It's not inherently bad—it helps you wake up in the morning, respond to danger, and regulate metabolism. The problem is when cortisol stays elevated for too long or spikes at the wrong times.

In a healthy pattern, cortisol should be **highest in the morning** (helping you wake up) and **lowest at night** (allowing you to sleep). Chronic stress disrupts this rhythm—and that's where the problems begin.

Daily Cortisol Pattern

Healthy rhythm vs. stressed/dysregulated pattern



The Evening Spike Problem: Notice how the stressed pattern shows cortisol *rising* in the evening instead of falling? This is why you feel "tired but wired" at night—your body is flooded with stress hormones right when it should be winding down.



The Sleep-Cortisol Cycle

Sleep deprivation creates a vicious cycle. When you don't get enough sleep, your body perceives it as stress and **raises cortisol levels the next day**. This elevated cortisol then makes it harder to fall asleep the following night—and the cycle continues.

Research shows: Just one night of poor sleep (less than 6 hours) can increase cortisol levels by up to 37% the following evening. Chronic sleep deprivation keeps cortisol chronically elevated, contributing to weight gain, mood issues, and metabolic dysfunction.



How Cortisol Leads to Weight Gain

Elevated cortisol doesn't just make you feel stressed—it actively promotes fat storage, especially around the midsection. Here's how:

- **Increases blood sugar:** Cortisol triggers glucose release, which (if unused) gets stored as fat
- **Promotes visceral fat:** Specifically encourages fat storage around organs (belly fat)
- **Increases cravings:** High cortisol drives cravings for sugar, salt, and high-fat foods
- **Slows metabolism:** Chronic stress can slow your metabolic rate over time



Ghrelin: The Hunger Hormone

Ghrelin is your body's "hunger hormone"—it signals to your brain that it's time to eat. When cortisol is elevated and sleep is disrupted, **ghrelin levels spike**, making you feel hungrier than you actually need to be.

When Ghrelin is Balanced:

- Natural hunger signals before meals
- Satisfaction after eating
- Stable energy between meals

When Ghrelin is Elevated:

- Constant hunger, even after eating
- Intense cravings for high-calorie foods
- Difficulty feeling satisfied



The Stress + Intense Exercise Trap

Here's something most people don't realize: **intense exercise is a stressor on the body.** HIIT workouts, heavy lifting, long runs, and intense spin classes all spike cortisol.

If you already have a high-stress job, a packed schedule, poor sleep, or constant mental pressure—and then you add high-intensity workouts—you're **stacking stress on top of stress.** Instead of helping, this can make cortisol dysregulation worse.

Signs you might be over-stressing with exercise:

- Feeling exhausted (not energized) after workouts
- Trouble sleeping despite being physically tired
- Plateaus or weight gain despite intense training
- Increased irritability and mood swings
- Getting sick more often



If You Run High, You Need to Go Low

If you're a high-functioning person—always moving, always busy, always "on"—your nervous system is likely stuck in sympathetic (fight-or-flight) mode. **You don't need more intensity. You need intentional calm.**

Breathwork

Box breathing, 4-7-8 technique, diaphragmatic breathing

Meditation

Even 5-10 minutes daily can significantly lower cortisol

Tai Chi

Gentle, flowing movements that calm the nervous system

Yoga

Restorative or yin yoga especially effective for stress

Walking

Low-intensity movement in nature amplifies benefits

Journaling

Processing thoughts reduces mental stress load

The goal isn't to eliminate stress—it's to balance it. For every hour of high-intensity activity (work stress, workouts, mental load), aim to incorporate intentional low-intensity recovery. Your nervous system will thank you.



It's Not About Quick Fixes

Managing cortisol isn't about taking a supplement or doing one meditation. It's about **integrating lifestyle changes** that become part of who you are. It requires **behavior change**—shifting how you approach your days, your workouts, your evenings, and your rest.

The Verdura Method focuses on exactly this: helping you understand the *why* behind your body's signals and building sustainable habits that actually stick. Real change happens when you work *with* your body, not against it.

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