

Simple Ways to Flush Out Damaging Excess Cortisol

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April 14, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Chronically high cortisol disrupts your metabolism, weakens your immune system, triggers blood sugar spikes, and leads to stubborn belly fat, poor sleep, and constant fatigue
- › Simple daily habits like slow breathing, early morning sunlight, and eating healthy carbs reset your cortisol rhythm and help your body recover from stress overload
- › Caffeine on an empty stomach, late-night screen exposure, and overtraining all send the wrong signals to your nervous system, keeping cortisol elevated when it should be winding down
- › Enjoyable activities like laughter and time with pets aren't just mood boosters — they trigger biochemical changes that lower cortisol and signal safety to your brain
- › Natural progesterone is one of the safest and most effective ways to block cortisol and restore calm

Cortisol is built for emergencies, but modern life keeps it switched on 24/7. Designed to help you react fast in moments of danger, this hormone floods your system with energy when you need to fight or flee. But when the stress rarely stops, your cortisol doesn't either. That's when the very system meant to protect you begins to do damage.

You're probably not sprinting from wild animals, but your body reacts the same way to constant deadlines, poor sleep, and emotional stress. Over time, that daily grind trains your body to live in survival mode. You stop recovering properly. Your energy dips. Your

digestion slows. You store more fat, especially around your belly, and lose muscle even when you're trying to stay active.

What makes this worse is how invisible it often is at first. You might feel tired, edgy, or wired at night. But underneath, your body is running on empty while cortisol stays elevated. And the longer that goes on, the more your hormone rhythms, metabolic function, and immune defenses unravel.

This isn't about managing stress in the abstract – it's about restoring your body's ability to reset. If you're feeling burned out, inflamed, or like your system is stuck in overdrive, there are simple, science-backed ways to flush out the excess and bring things back into balance.

Simple Habits That Help Flush Cortisol Naturally

A featured article in *Vogue* highlights advice from physician Dr. Liza Osagie-Clouard and registered dietitian Jodie Relf.¹ It explores how to support your body's natural cortisol-clearing processes through lifestyle changes, not medication. Their approach is built around simple tools – breathwork, sleep, movement, and blood sugar balance – that anyone can apply, even if you're overwhelmed or short on time.

- **People dealing with chronic stress symptoms benefit most from these changes –** This information is aimed at people who feel “wired but tired,” have trouble sleeping, gain weight around the midsection, or struggle with irritability and sugar cravings. These signs point to **cortisol overload**, which is often worsened by morning coffee on an empty stomach or overtraining without proper rest.
- **Breathwork stands out as a fast, drug-free tool to bring cortisol down –** Dr. Osagie-Clouard recommends lengthening your exhale to shift your body into a parasympathetic state – the “rest and digest” mode that opposes stress activation. A quick version of this is the “parasympathetic sigh,” where you inhale, then take a second sip of air before slowly releasing it. This practice gives your nervous system the green light to relax and helps your body flush out excess cortisol naturally.

- **Caffeine is a silent contributor to cortisol overload but timing matters** – There’s a downside to relying on coffee to get through the morning fog, especially on an empty stomach. “Coffee is a stimulant which will raise cortisol levels,” says Relf. Having it before eating keeps you stuck in the stress cycle. Instead, wait until after breakfast, or reduce intake altogether if you already feel overstimulated. You don’t have to eliminate caffeine entirely, just shift when and how you drink it.
- **Gentle exercise like walking reduces cortisol more effectively than high-intensity workouts** – Forget marathon gym sessions. Regular, moderate movement helps balance cortisol levels without triggering more stress. The key is consistency, not intensity. People with [polycystic ovary syndrome \(PCOS\)](#) or [adrenal imbalances](#) often see the greatest benefit from low-impact activities, which also improve insulin sensitivity and emotional resilience.

Reset Your Hormones by Fixing Sleep, Stabilizing Blood Sugar, and Finding Joy

If you’re tossing and turning at night, your cortisol rhythm is likely reversed – too high in the evening and too low in the morning. The solution isn’t just sleep quantity but bedtime rituals. A consistent [sleep-wake time](#), along with calming wind-down habits like dim lights or reading, help your cortisol follow its natural cycle again.

- **Blood sugar swings worsen cortisol imbalances – balanced meals are key** – Spiking your glucose leads to more cortisol as your body scrambles to restore balance. Try pairing carbs with healthy fats and protein to slow absorption. Instead of eating fruit alone, combine it with raw, grass fed yogurt to reduce the sugar spike. That simple change lessens the hormonal stress response and leaves you with steadier energy.
- **Ashwagandha supports cortisol regulation if used consistently and wisely** – As an adaptogen, [ashwagandha](#) helps your body become more resilient to stress. Research shows that 250 milligrams (mg) to 800 mg daily for eight weeks led to

measurable drops in cortisol.² But sourcing matters. Look for 100% organic ashwagandha root, free of fillers, additives, and excipients. Unfortunately, adulterated ashwagandha products have been found on the market, so buyer beware.

- **Spirituality, laughter, and fun are underrated cortisol detoxifiers** – For people with a spiritual practice, prayer has been shown to lower cortisol and increase calm during life stress.³ If you're not spiritual, the same benefits show up through meditation, community connection, or simple pleasures like laughter.⁴

Chronically Elevated Cortisol Throws Off Nearly Every Major Body System

Often labeled merely as a stress hormone, cortisol fulfills many other functions within your body. Its main role is to act as a vital defense mechanism, ensuring that your blood glucose levels don't plummet to hazardous lows. By maintaining these levels, cortisol safeguards you against the severe danger of a hypoglycemic coma.⁵

Although cortisol's actions are beneficial in the short term, consistently high levels negatively impact your health. As noted by the Cleveland Clinic, cortisol is a master regulator that affects your metabolism, sleep rhythm, blood pressure, inflammation, and immune defense.⁶ **Chronic high cortisol** damages these systems one by one. When left unchecked, the result is often accelerated aging, insulin resistance, and persistent fatigue that no amount of rest can fix.

- **This is especially dangerous for people with hormonal imbalances or metabolic issues** – Cortisol's wide-ranging effects become especially harmful when your body's regulatory loop – managed by your brain and adrenal glands – breaks down. Your hypothalamus, pituitary gland, and adrenal glands work as a team to keep cortisol in balance. But chronic stress overrides this system, causing dysfunction that leads to everything from sleep disruption to hormone depletion.

- **Cortisol pushes blood sugar up, then blocks insulin from doing its job** – When you're stressed, cortisol signals your liver to release glucose so you have immediate energy. That part is normal. The problem comes when that stress doesn't end. Cortisol also suppresses insulin – the hormone that helps move sugar into your cells for fuel. That double action creates blood sugar spikes followed by crashes, which leave you wired, hungry, moody, and ultimately **insulin resistant** over time.
- **Over time, your immune system stops responding to cortisol at all** – Short bursts of cortisol help tamp down inflammation, which is how your body prevents overreaction to stress or infection. But with constant elevation, your immune system becomes desensitized to cortisol's signal. That means more inflammation, more infections, and slower recovery from illness. You feel run down, get sick more often, and take longer to heal, even from minor cuts or colds.
- **Cortisol throws off blood pressure regulation and muscle metabolism** – Cortisol influences blood pressure, though the exact mechanics aren't fully understood. What is known is that people with chronically high cortisol often have high blood pressure. Additionally, cortisol breaks down muscle tissue to free up amino acids for emergency energy use. In a prolonged stress state, this leads to muscle wasting, physical weakness, and slower metabolic function.
- **Without action, elevated cortisol creates long-term metabolic damage** – The longer cortisol remains out of balance, the more entrenched the damage becomes. Chronically high cortisol leads to conditions like Type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, immune dysfunction, and in extreme cases, Cushing's syndrome – a hormonal disorder marked by fat accumulation in the face and abdomen, muscle loss, and stretch marks.

Enjoyment, Breathwork, and Light Movement Lower Cortisol Fast

You don't need expensive programs or clinical interventions to reduce cortisol – just daily behaviors that align with how your body naturally resets stress. Fun, healthy food, and movement are among the most underused remedies for stress overload.⁷

- **Breathwork methods like the 4-7-8 technique directly influence the vagus nerve** – This technique involves inhaling for four seconds, holding for seven, and exhaling for eight. Doing just a few rounds shifts your nervous system out of the “fight or flight” state and into the relaxation zone. Activating the vagus nerve – your body’s command switch for rest – lowers cortisol almost immediately and helps prevent your brain from getting stuck in stress loops.⁸
- **Spending time with pets lowers stress markers through oxytocin release** – Even a few minutes of petting a friendly dog or cat is enough to lower cortisol and increase oxytocin – a hormone linked to bonding, calmness, and trust.⁹ This is one of the fastest and most accessible ways to buffer cortisol spikes, especially if you feel isolated or overstimulated by daily demands.¹⁰
- **Blue light exposure after sunset disrupts your body’s hormonal clock** – Staring at phones or tablets at night keeps your brain locked in daytime mode. **Blue light** suppresses melatonin (your sleep hormone) and increases cortisol at exactly the wrong time. Shut off screens at least 60 minutes before bed or use blue-light blocking glasses to minimize the damage. Also opt for warmer, dimmer lighting in your home as it gets dark.
- **Even food choices influence your cortisol rhythm** – Fermented foods like kimchi, kefir, and sauerkraut are helpful for stress because they support gut health. Gut bacteria are directly linked to your brain’s emotional center, so improving your digestion improves how you process stress. Staying hydrated also helps – dehydration is a common trigger for temporary cortisol spikes, especially in the afternoon slump.
- **Doing what you enjoy resets your stress response naturally** – Whether it’s gardening, painting, or listening to music, **joy** acts as a cortisol buffer. Your body isn’t wired to stay in survival mode when you’re actively engaged in something meaningful. Fun isn’t optional – it’s a necessary signal that tells your brain you’re safe again.

Simple Steps to Reset Cortisol and Calm Your Stress System

If your stress feels like it's running the show, you're not imagining things – chronically high cortisol throws off everything from your mood to your metabolism. But it's not permanent. You can reset your body's stress response by making small, consistent changes that address the root cause: a nervous system stuck in overdrive, poor blood sugar control, and an overloaded lifestyle.

Whether you're exhausted, wired, or feeling like your body just isn't recovering like it used to, these are the steps I recommend to restore balance and help your body flush excess cortisol naturally. Here's how to start:

- 1. Eat enough healthy carbs to stop cortisol spikes** – If you've been **cutting carbohydrates**, your body is stuck in a stress pattern. Cortisol rises every time your blood sugar dips too low, so increasing healthy carbohydrate intake helps lower cortisol levels. Start by aiming for 250 grams of carbs per day, which supports sustained metabolic health and ensures that your mitochondria function efficiently.

Prioritize easy-to-digest options like fruit and white rice. When your gut is ready, meaning no bloating and no irregular bowel movements, gradually add in root vegetables, then legumes, additional vegetables, and well-tolerated whole grains.

- 2. Cut back on endurance exercise and overtraining** – If you're doing long cardio sessions, distance running, or frequent high-intensity interval training, you're telling your body it's constantly under threat. That **pushes cortisol higher**. Switch to shorter, gentle strength training, walking, dancing, or swimming. If you feel worse after a workout instead of better, that's your body telling you it's time to pull back.

- 3. Reset your nervous system with breathwork and rhythm** – Use breathing techniques like the 4-7-8 method or a parasympathetic sigh to shift your body out of fight-or-flight mode. The 4-8 breathing technique – inhale for four seconds, pause, then exhale slowly for eight – also stimulates your vagus nerve and quickly lowers cortisol, guiding your body into a calmer, more restorative state.

This isn't just mental – it's physical. The longer your exhale, the more your vagus nerve activates, which tells your whole body, "You're safe." Do this before bed, when you're feeling overwhelmed, or after meals to support digestion and hormone balance.

- 4. Make sleep non-negotiable – and fix your light exposure** – Your cortisol rhythm depends on your **circadian clock**. That means getting bright morning sunlight and avoiding screens and dimming lights after sunset. Keep your bedtime and wake-up time as consistent as possible. If you're dragging during the day, don't depend on coffee – **look at your sleep first**. Rest is not a luxury. It's how your body resets and clears out stress hormones.
- 5. Use natural progesterone to calm your brain and body** – Natural progesterone is one of the most effective and affordable ways to bring your stress hormones back under control. Unlike synthetic progestins, natural progesterone is a hormone your body already recognizes and responds to. It acts directly as a cortisol blocker, helping lower the amount of cortisol circulating in your bloodstream and dialing down the stress response at its source.

How to Use Progesterone

Before you consider using progesterone, it is important to understand that it is not a magic bullet, and that you get the most benefit by implementing a Bioenergetic diet approach that allows you to effectively burn glucose as your primary fuel without backing up electrons in your mitochondria that reduces your energy production. My book, "Your Guide to Cellular Health: Unlocking the Science of Longevity and Joy," covers this process in great detail.

Once you have dialed in your diet, an effective strategy that can help counteract estrogen excess is to take transmucosal progesterone (i.e., applied to your gums, not oral or transdermal), which is a natural estrogen antagonist. Progesterone is one of only three hormones I believe many adults can benefit from. (The other two are DHEA and pregnenolone.)

I do not recommend transdermal progesterone, as your skin expresses high levels of 5-alpha reductase enzyme, which causes a significant portion of the progesterone you're taking to be irreversibly converted primarily into allopregnanolone and cannot be converted back into progesterone.

Ideal Way to Administer Progesterone

Please note that when progesterone is used transmucosally on your gums as I advise, the FDA believes that somehow converts it into a drug and prohibits any company from advising that on its label. This is why companies promote their progesterone products as "topical."

However, please understand that it is perfectly legal for any physician to recommend an off-label indication for a drug to their patient. In this case, progesterone is a natural hormone and not a drug and is very safe even in high doses. This is unlike synthetic progesterone called progestins that are used by drug companies, but frequently, and incorrectly, referred.

Dr. Ray Peat has done the seminal work in progesterone and probably was the world's greatest expert on progesterone. He wrote his Ph.D. on estrogen in 1982 and spent most of his professional career documenting the need to counteract the dangers of excess estrogen with low-LA diets and transmucosal progesterone supplementation.

He determined that most solvents do not dissolve progesterone well and discovered that vitamin E is the best solvent to optimally provide progesterone in your tissue. Vitamin E also protects you against damage from LA. You just need to be very careful about which vitamin E you use as most supplemental vitamin E on the market is worse than worthless and will cause you harm not benefit.

It is imperative to avoid using any synthetic vitamin E (alpha tocopherol acetate – the acetate indicates that it's synthetic). Natural vitamin E will be labeled "d alpha tocopherol." This is the pure D isomer, which is what your body can use.

There are also other vitamin E isomers, and you want the complete spectrum of tocopherols and tocotrienols, specifically the beta, gamma, and delta types, in the effective D isomer. As an example of an ideal vitamin E, you can look at the label on our vitamin E in our store. You can use any brand that has a similar label.

You can purchase pharmaceutical grade bioidentical progesterone as Progesterone Powder, Bioidentical Micronized Powder, 10 grams for about \$40 on many online stores like Amazon. That is nearly a year's supply, depending on the dose you choose.

However, you will need to purchase some small stainless steel measuring spoons as you will need a 1/64 tsp, which is 25 mg and a 1/32 tsp, which is 50 mg. A normal dose is typically 25 to 50 mg and is taken 30 to 60 minutes before bed, as it has an anti-cortisol function and will increase GABA levels for a good night's sleep.

If you are a menstruating woman, you should take the progesterone during the luteal phase or the last half of your cycle, which can be determined by starting 10 days after the first day of your period and stopping the progesterone when your period starts.

If you are a male or non-menstruating woman, you can take the progesterone every day for four to six months and then cycle off for one week. The best time of day to take progesterone is 30 to 60 minutes before bed as it has an anti-cortisol function and will increase GABA levels for a good night's sleep.

This is what I have been personally doing for over a year with very good results. I am a physician so do not have any problems doing this. If you aren't a physician, you should consult one before using this therapy, as transmucosal progesterone therapy requires a doctor's prescription.

FAQs About Cortisol

Q: What is cortisol, and why is it harmful when it's too high for too long?

A: Cortisol is your body's primary stress hormone. It's designed to help you respond to immediate danger by raising blood sugar, blood pressure, and alertness. But when cortisol stays high for extended periods – due to ongoing stress, poor sleep, or overtraining – it disrupts nearly every system in your body. Long-term high cortisol contributes to belly fat, blood sugar imbalances, weakened immunity, sleep problems, and even muscle loss.

Q: How do I know if my cortisol is too high?

A: Common signs of chronically high cortisol include feeling wired but tired, difficulty falling asleep, belly fat that won't budge, sugar and salt cravings, frequent illness, and irritability. You might also notice thinning hair, blood sugar crashes, or anxiety. These symptoms often worsen over time if the underlying stress isn't addressed.

Q: What lifestyle habits help lower cortisol naturally?

A: Gentle daily habits like walking, breathwork (such as the 4-7-8 method), consistent sleep routines, and eating healthy carbohydrates all help your body reset cortisol levels. Avoiding blue light at night, reducing caffeine, and making time for joy or relaxation – like spending time with pets or enjoying hobbies – are also effective tools to calm your stress response.

Q: Why is sleep so important for cortisol balance?

A: Cortisol follows a daily rhythm – it should be highest in the morning and lowest at night. Poor or irregular sleep reverses that rhythm, making it harder for your body to recover and regulate inflammation. A fixed bedtime, morning sunlight, and avoiding screens at night help restore this natural cycle so cortisol doesn't stay

elevated after dark.

Q: How does natural progesterone help bring stress hormones back into balance?

A: Natural progesterone is a safe, effective, and affordable way to lower excess cortisol. It works as a direct cortisol blocker, reducing the amount of this stress hormone circulating in your system. Unlike synthetic progestins, natural progesterone supports your body's own hormone rhythms without adding to the burden.

Sources and References

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