

The Cortisol Effect *Friend or Foe?*



HEART & SOLE HOLISTICS



Understanding stress and supporting your body

Your body is not working against you, it is always working for you.

Cortisol has become something many of us fear. We hear it and think of stress, exhaustion, overwhelm, but cortisol itself is not the problem.

It is a messenger. A protector. A signal that your body believes it needs to stay alert, aware, and ready.

The truth is, many of us have simply been living in a world that asks too much of our nervous system for too long. Constant stimulation. Busy minds. Little moments of rest that never quite feel like enough.

Over time, the body forgets how to switch off.

This guide is here to gently bring you back. Back to calm. Back to safety.

Back to a place where your body no longer feels the need to stay on high alert.

Not through force, not through restriction.

But through softness, understanding and small, powerful shifts.

What is Cortisol?

Cortisol is a hormone produced by the adrenal glands. It plays a key role in helping the body respond to stress and maintain normal daily function.

It is often referred to as the 'stress hormone', but cortisol is not harmful in itself.

In fact, it is essential for survival.

Cortisol helps to:

- Regulate blood sugar levels
- Control inflammation
- Support metabolism
- Maintain blood pressure
- Help the body respond to physical and emotional stress

Cortisol naturally follows a daily rhythm, known as the Circadian Rhythm, rising in the morning to help you wake up and gradually lowering throughout the day to allow the body to rest and recover.

When cortisol becomes a problem.

Issues arise when cortisol levels remain consistently elevated over time.

This is often due to chronic stress, where the body stays in a prolonged 'alert' state rather than returning to a relaxed baseline.

Modern lifestyle factors that may contribute include:

- Ongoing mental stress (work, responsibilities, overthinking)
- Poor sleep patterns
- High caffeine intake
- Blood sugar imbalance
- Lack of rest or recovery time

When the body does not get regular signals of safety, it continues to produce cortisol unnecessarily.



How does cortisol help us function?

Cortisol plays a key role in keeping us awake, alert, and responsive.

In appropriate amounts, it:

- Helps you wake up in the morning
- Increases focus and concentration
- Provides energy in demanding situations
- Supports the body during exercise or illness

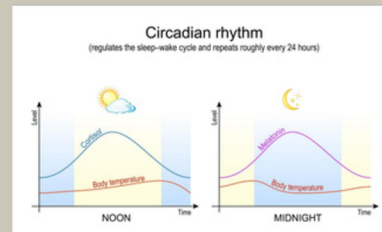
In short, cortisol is designed to protect and prepare the body, not harm it.

The Circadian Rhythm and Cortisol

The body follows a natural circadian rhythm. A 24-hour internal clock that regulates sleep, energy, and hormone release.

Cortisol follows this rhythm closely:

- Morning: Highest (helps you wake and feel alert)
- Midday: Gradually declines
- Evening: Lowers further
- Night: Lowest (to support sleep and repair)



When this rhythm is balanced, energy and sleep feel natural and consistent.

The Body Clock. Then vs Now

The human body evolved in alignment with natural light cycles.

Historically:

- We woke with sunrise
- We were active during daylight
- We rested after sunset

This pattern regulated cortisol naturally. However, modern life has changed dramatically:

- Artificial lighting
- Screen exposure late at night
- Irregular sleep patterns
- Constant mental stimulation

Despite these changes, our biology has not adapted at the same pace.

We are still deeply influenced by:

- Light and dark cycles
- Natural sleep rhythms
- Hormonal patterns linked to a roughly 28-day biological cycle

This mismatch between modern lifestyle and ancient biology can disrupt cortisol balance.



What happens during a cortisol spike?

A cortisol spike occurs when the body perceives stress or threat.

This triggers the fight-or-flight response:

- Increased heart rate
- Faster breathing
- Heightened alertness
- Release of stored energy (glucose)

This response is helpful in short bursts. However, when spikes happen frequently or continuously, the body does not fully return to a relaxed state.

Common causes of cortisol spikes

Many modern triggers are not physical threats, but the body responds as if they are.

Common causes include:

- Emotional stress and overthinking
- Poor sleep or irregular routines
- Excess caffeine
- Blood sugar fluctuations
- Overtraining or intense exercise
- Constant notifications and screen time
- Lack of downtime or recovery

Over time, these repeated triggers can keep the body in a prolonged stress state.

Signs of Elevated Cortisol

Chronically High cortisol can present in a variety of ways. You may not always recognise these symptoms as stress related.

Common signs include:

- Feeling “wired but tired”
- Difficulty switching off or relaxing
- Poor sleep or waking during the night
- Increased anxiety or irritability
- Sugar or carbohydrate cravings
- Weight gain, particularly around the abdomen
- Muscle tension (neck, shoulders, jaw)
- Digestive discomfort

These symptoms are not a failure of the body, but rather they are a sign that the nervous system is under prolonged demand.



Why Can Cortisol Cause Belly Bloating?

Chronic elevated cortisol can influence how the body stores fat and manages digestion.

Key effects include:

- Increased fat storage around the abdomen
- Slower digestion
- Increased water retention
- Changes in gut function

The body prioritises survival over digestion during stress, which can lead to:

- Bloating
- Discomfort
- Changes in appetite

Cortisol and Fascia Tension - the link to back pain.

Cortisol and the stress response can also affect the fascia, the connective tissue surrounding muscles and organs.

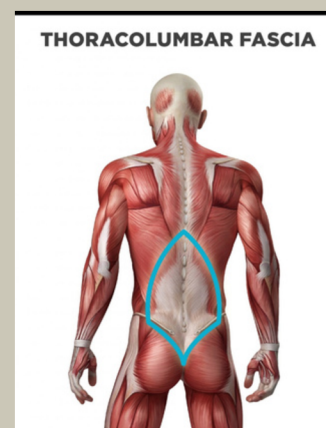
When the body is under prolonged stress:

- Muscles remain slightly contracted
- Fascia can become tighter and less flexible
- Circulation may reduce in certain areas

This can contribute to:

- Back pain
- Neck and shoulder tension
- General stiffness

The body is, in effect, staying in a guarded, protective state.



Holistic Treatments That Can Help

Your Supporting cortisol balance involves helping the body return to a parasympathetic (rest and digest) state.

Effective treatments include:

Relaxation Massage

- Reduces muscle tension
- Encourages circulation
- Signals safety to the nervous system

Reflexology

- Stimulates pressure points linked to body systems
- Promotes deep relaxation

Reiki / Energy-Based Treatments

- Supports emotional and nervous system balance
- Encourages a sense of calm

Scalp & Head Massage

- Helps reduce mental overstimulation
- Supports relaxation and sleep



CORTISOL AND SKIN HEALTH

How Stress Can Show On The Skin

The skin is closely connected to the body's stress response. When cortisol levels remain elevated over time, it can affect multiple skin functions, including oil production, inflammation, and healing.

Breakouts & Acne

Elevated cortisol can increase oil (sebum) production, which may lead to:

- Blocked pores
- Increased breakouts
- Inflammation in the skin

Stress-related breakouts are often seen around:

- Jawline
- Chin
- Lower face

Sensitivity & Redness

Chronic stress can weaken the skin barrier.

This may result in:

- Increased sensitivity
- Redness or irritation
- Reactivity to products that are usually tolerated

Premature Ageing

Cortisol can impact collagen and elastin, which are essential for skin structure.

Over time, this may contribute to:

- Fine lines
- Loss of firmness
- Dull or tired-looking skin

Dehydration & Dullness

When the body is in a prolonged stress state, it prioritises survival over repair.

This can lead to:

- Reduced hydration in the skin
- A dull or uneven complexion
- Slower skin renewal rate



Cortisol & Skin Health Continued

Slower Healing

Elevated cortisol can delay the skin's natural repair processes.

This may mean:

- Spots take longer to heal
- Increased likelihood of scarring
- Reduced recovery after treatments

Under Eye Concerns

Stress and poor sleep (linked to cortisol imbalance) can contribute to:

- Dark circles
- Puffiness
- Tired appearance

Why This Matters

The skin often reflects what is happening internally.

When cortisol remains elevated:

- Inflammation increases
- Repair decreases
- Balance is disrupted

Supporting The Skin Holistically

Addressing skin concerns is not only about products — it also involves supporting the nervous system.

Helpful approaches include:

- Relaxation facials
- Lymphatic drainage
- Facial massage
- Stress-reducing treatments (Reiki, reflexology)
- Consistent sleep and routine

Healthy skin is not only influenced by what is applied topically, but also by how the body responds to stress internally



The Pericardium

The pericardium is a protective sac that surrounds the heart.

Its role is to support and protect the heart while allowing it to function smoothly.

In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the pericardium is also associated with emotional regulation and protection of the heart's energy.

It is sometimes referred to as the body's 'emotional buffer', helping to process and respond to stress more effectively

Points along the pericardium meridian, such as PC6 (Neiguan), are commonly used to:

- Calm the nervous system
- Reduce feelings of anxiety
- Support emotional balance

PC6

Location: 3 finger widths below the wrist crease, between the two tendons

Supports:

- Anxiety and emotional stress
- Nausea
- Nervous system regulation

How to use:

- Apply steady pressure and massage gently for 1–2 minutes on each wrist.





The Nervous System

Cortisol is closely linked to the autonomic nervous system, which controls how the body responds to stress.

There are two primary states:

Sympathetic Nervous System (Fight or Flight)

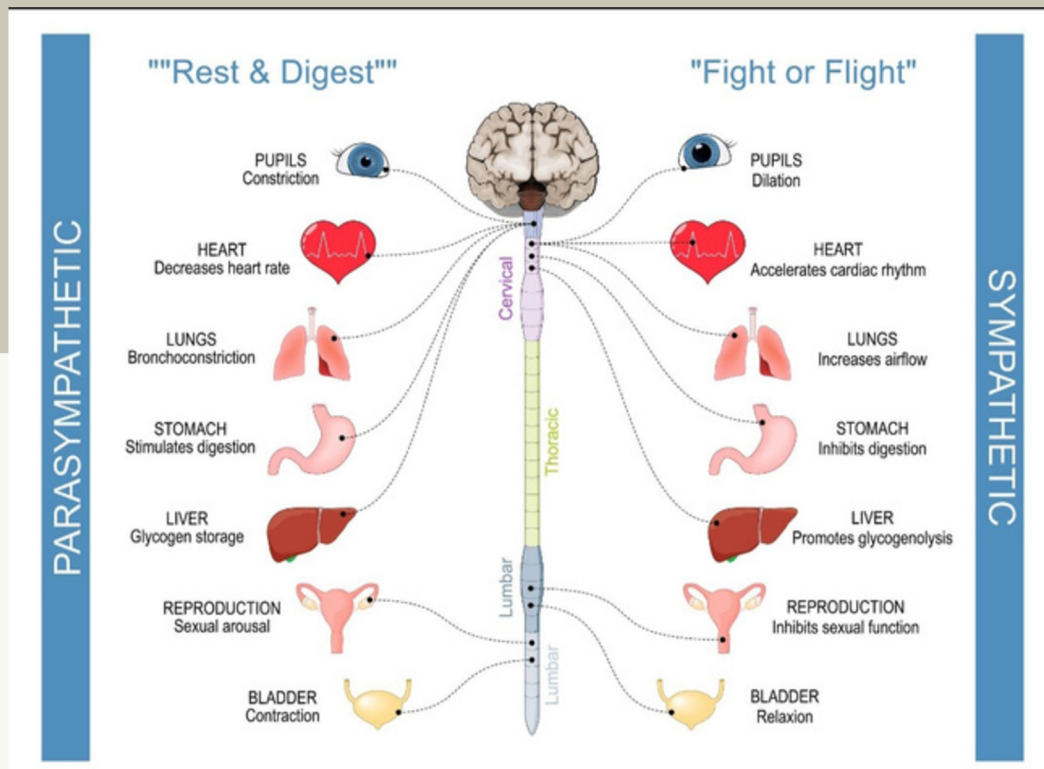
- Activated during stress
- Increases heart rate and alertness
- Raises cortisol levels

Parasympathetic Nervous System (Rest and Digest)

- Promotes relaxation and recovery
- Supports digestion and healing
- Helps lower cortisol

In many individuals, the body spends too much time in the sympathetic (stress) state and not enough in the parasympathetic (calm) state.

Therapies such as massage, reflexology, and relaxation treatments are effective because they help shift the body back into this restorative mode.





A Practical Daily Plan to Support Regulation

This routine is designed to help regulate cortisol by supporting the nervous system throughout the day.

Consistency is more important than intensity. Small, repeated actions signal safety to the body.

Morning Regulation 30 - 60mins

Cortisol naturally rises in the morning. The goal is to support a steady, not excessive, increase.

Avoid:

- Immediately checking your phone
- High caffeine intake on an empty stomach

Support the body with:

1. PC6 Acupoint Stimulation (Neiguan)

- Location: 3 finger widths below the wrist crease, centred between the two tendons
- Method: Apply gentle pressure and massage in circular motions for 1–2 minutes on each wrist
- Benefits:
 - Helps regulate the nervous system
 - May reduce anxiety and nausea
 - Encourages a calmer start to the day

2. Slow Breathing (2–5 minutes)

- Inhale through the nose for 4 seconds
- Exhale slowly for 6 seconds

Why it works:

Longer exhales activate the parasympathetic nervous system, helping prevent an excessive cortisol spike.

3. Gentle Movement

- Stretching, walking, or light mobility work
- Avoid: high-intensity exercise immediately on waking if already feeling stressed or fatigued.



Midday Regulation

This is where many people remain in a prolonged stress state without realising it.

Key focus: Interrupt the stress cycle

Shoulder & Jaw Release

- Roll shoulders slowly
- Gently unclench the jaw
- Take 3 slow breaths

Why:

Physical tension reinforces the stress response. Releasing it signals safety to the brain.

5. Hydration & Blood Sugar Balance

- Eat regularly
- Include protein and healthy fats

Why:

Blood sugar drops can trigger cortisol release.

Evening Wind-Down

Cortisol should naturally decline in the evening to prepare the body for sleep.

Reduce:

- Bright lights
- Stimulation (phones, TV use close to bedtime)

6. Calming Acupoint: Yin Tang (Third Eye Area)

Location: Between the eyebrows

Method: Light pressure or gentle circular massage for 1–2 minutes

Benefits:

- Promotes relaxation
- Helps quiet the mind
- Supports sleep readiness

7. Down-Regulation Breathing

- Inhale for 4
- Exhale for 6–8

8. Sensory Cue for Relaxation

- Use calming scents (e.g. lavender, frankincense)
- Pair with a consistent evening routine

Why:

The brain begins to associate these cues with safety and rest, helping cortisol lower naturally.



Quick Reset Techniques

2-Minute Tools to Lower Stress & Support Cortisol Balance. These techniques are designed to be used anytime during the day when you feel overwhelmed, anxious, or unable to switch off. They work by helping the body shift from a stress (fight or flight) state into a calm (rest and digest) state.

1. Physiological Sigh (Fast Calm Technique)

How to do it:

- Inhale through the nose
- Take a second short inhale (top-up breath)
- Slowly exhale through the mouth
- Repeat for 1–2 minutes.

Why it works:

- This breathing pattern helps release excess carbon dioxide and quickly reduces stress signals in the body.

2. PC6 Acupoint Reset

How to do it:

- Locate 3 finger widths below the wrist crease
- Between the two central tendons
- Apply firm but comfortable pressure
- Massage in slow circles for 1–2 minutes

When to use:

- Feeling anxious
- Nauseous or unsettled
- Heart racing

3. Eye Focus Reset

How to do it:

- Look around the room slowly
- Name 5 objects you can see
- Soften your gaze (avoid staring at screens)

Why it works:

Stress narrows vision. Expanding your visual field signals safety to the brain.

4. Hand-on-Heart Technique

How to do it:

- Place one hand on your chest
- One hand on your stomach
- Take slow breaths for 1–2 minutes

Why it works:

Physical touch helps regulate the nervous system and reduce cortisol levels.



Quick Reset Techniques Cont...

5. Yin Tang (Calm Point)

How to do it:

- Gently press or massage between the eyebrows
- Use small circular motions

When to use:

- Overthinking
- Before sleep
- During emotional overwhelm

6. Movement Reset

Options:

- Walk for 2–5 minutes
- Roll shoulders
- Stretch arms overhead

Why it works:

- Movement helps discharge built-up stress hormones from the body.

7. Extended Exhale Breathing

How to do it:

- Inhale for 4 seconds
- Exhale for 6–8 seconds
- Repeat for 2–3 minutes.

Why it works:

Longer exhales activate the parasympathetic nervous system, helping reduce cortisol.

Quick Reset Techniques

You do not need to use all of these.

Start with:

- 1–2 techniques that feel easiest
- Use them consistently each day

Most effective times:

- Morning overwhelm
- Midday stress
- Before bed

Key Message

You do not need an hour to reset your body.

You need small, consistent moments of safety.

Even 2 minutes can begin to shift your nervous system.



Brainwaves & The Stress Response

Alpha vs Beta States

The brain operates using different electrical patterns, known as brainwaves, which reflect our mental and nervous system state. Two key states linked to stress and relaxation are beta and alpha.

Beta Waves - The Active State

Beta brainwaves are present when we are:

- Awake
- Focused
- Thinking, analysing, or problem-solving

This is a necessary and useful state for daily life.

However, when the brain remains in high beta for prolonged periods, it is often associated with:

- Stress
- Overthinking
- Anxiety
- Mental fatigue

This state is closely linked to elevated cortisol levels, as the body remains in a more alert, “on guard” mode.

Alpha Waves - The Calm State

- Alpha brainwaves occur when the body and mind are:
- Relaxed but still awake
- Calm and present
- Not actively stressed or overstimulated

Alpha is often described as the bridge between conscious thought and deeper relaxation. It is a state where the nervous system begins to shift into rest and repair mode.

Alpha, Rest and Healing

During relaxed states — such as:

- Gentle meditation
- Deep relaxation
- Holistic treatments (massage, reiki, reflexology)

The brain is more likely to move into alpha wave activity. This supports:

- Reduced stress hormone levels
- Improved recovery and repair
- A calmer emotional state
- Some research also suggests that this state enhances focus, creativity, and receptiveness, which is why it is often linked to visualisation and intention-setting practices.



Sleep & Brainwaves (Important Clarification)

Sleep involves multiple brainwave stages.

Alpha occurs in the early stages of relaxation and light rest

Deeper sleep involves slower brainwaves (Theta and Delta), which are essential for physical repair. So while alpha is not the deepest sleep state, it plays an important role in transitioning the body into restorative states.

Modern Life & Returning to Beta

In today's environment, the brain is frequently pulled back into beta activity, often without us realising.

Common triggers include:

- Phone use and notifications
- Social media scrolling
- Bright screens and artificial light
- Constant mental stimulation

Even short periods of screen exposure can:

- Increase alertness
- Interrupt relaxation
- Pull the nervous system back into a more active state

This can make it harder for the body to:

- Fully relax
- Lower cortisol levels
- Transition into restful sleep

Why This Matters For Cortisol

The more time the brain spends in a high-alert beta state, the more likely the body is to:

- Maintain elevated cortisol
- Struggle to switch off
- Feel “wired but tired”

Creating regular opportunities to shift into alpha states helps signal a sense of safety to the body and supports cortisol regulation.

Supporting Alpha States

Simple ways to encourage alpha brainwave activity include:

- Slow breathing
- Massage and touch
- Acupressure (e.g. PC6, Yin Tang)
- Reducing screen time, especially in the evening
- Calm, low-stimulation environments



So, remember

The body cannot fully relax while the brain remains in a constant state of alert. Creating small moments of calm throughout the day allows the brain to shift into a more relaxed state, supporting both recovery and cortisol balance.

Disclaimer

Heart & Sole Holistics

The information provided in this guide is for educational and informational purposes only. It is not intended to replace medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment from a qualified healthcare professional.

While the content is based on current understanding of stress, cortisol, and holistic wellbeing practices, individual responses may vary. Any techniques, suggestions, or therapies mentioned should be used as supportive measures and not as a substitute for professional medical care.

If you have any underlying health conditions, are pregnant, taking medication, or have concerns about your physical or mental health, you are advised to consult with your GP or a qualified healthcare provider before making any changes to your routine.

Heart & Sole Holistics does not diagnose medical conditions or provide medical treatment. All holistic therapies and recommendations are intended to support relaxation, wellbeing, and balance alongside conventional healthcare where appropriate.

By using this guide, you acknowledge that you are responsible for your own health decisions.

I hope you find this information useful. You can find more information regarding any of the above subjects online.

Take a breath...

Elaine.



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