



Patient & Family Guide

2026

Adrenal Insufficiency

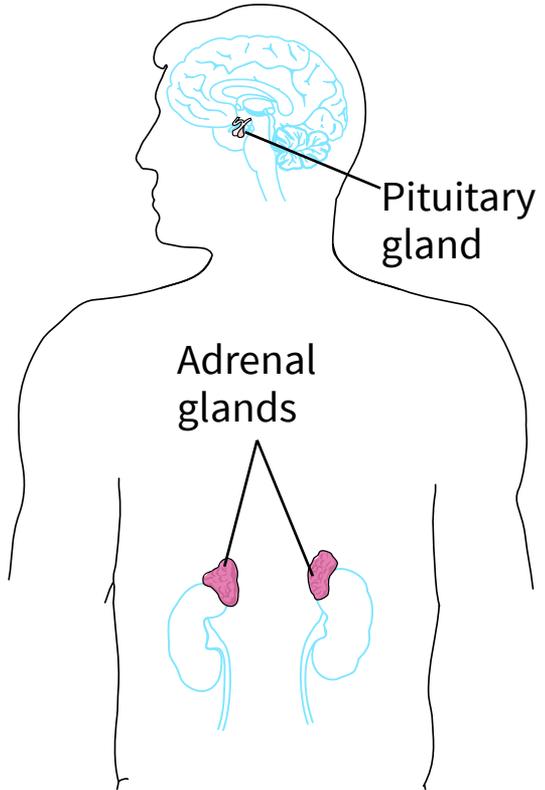


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Adrenal Insufficiency

What are adrenal glands?

- Your body has 2 adrenal glands, 1 on top of each kidney.
- The adrenal glands make steroid hormones called **cortisol** and **aldosterone**. Steroid hormones are needed for your body to work well.
- **Cortisol** helps your body use sugar and protein for energy, and helps you respond to stress and infections.
 - › The pituitary gland makes a hormone called ACTH (adrenocorticotrophic hormone). It uses ACTH to control the release of cortisol.
- **Aldosterone** helps your body regulate blood pressure by keeping the right amounts of salt, potassium, and water.



What is adrenal insufficiency?

- Insufficiency means not enough. Adrenal insufficiency happens when your adrenal glands do not make enough hormones.
- Adrenal insufficiency may be permanent or temporary.

If it is permanent, you must take medication every day for the rest of your life.

Permanent adrenal insufficiency can be caused by:

- › Addison's disease (your adrenal glands do not make enough hormones)
- › Pituitary tumours
- › Removal of your pituitary gland
- › Removal of your adrenal glands
- › Congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH) (a group of inherited [passed from parents to their children] disorders of the adrenal glands)

Temporary adrenal insufficiency can be caused by:

- › Using a steroid medication
- › Pituitary gland surgery
- › Adrenal gland surgery
- › Medications that lower your cortisol levels (like ketoconazole)

What are the symptoms of adrenal insufficiency?

If your body does not make enough adrenal hormones, you may not feel well. Symptoms may include:

- › Unusual tiredness and weakness
- › Vomiting (throwing up)
- › Dizziness when you stand up
- › Diarrhea (loose, watery poop)
- › Nausea (upset stomach)
- › Not feeling hungry
- › Stomachache

Each person's symptoms may be different.

Over time, you may have:

- › Weight loss
- › Cravings for salt
- › Darkening of your skin

How is adrenal insufficiency treated?

- **You must take medication every day** to keep your adrenal insufficiency under control.
- Your primary health care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner) will prescribe a **replacement dose** (amount). This is the amount your adrenal glands would normally make **in a situation that is not stressful.**

- **You must take this medication in the amount and at the times prescribed by your primary health care provider.** This dose will not harm you. It is not the same as larger doses of steroids given for treatment of other medical conditions.
- **If you have problems with cortisol, you can take:**
 - › Hydrocortisone
 - › Cortef®
 - › Prednisone
 - › Solu-Cortef®
 - › Cortisone acetate
- **If you have problems with aldosterone (Aldactone®), you can take:**
 - › Florinef®

When should I take more than my regular dose?

- Adrenal glands that are working properly make more cortisol when the body is under some types of stress.
- **During stressful times, you will need to take 2 times the amount of your prescribed cortisol dose.**
- Talk to your primary health care provider about this.

Stressful times are when you have:

- › A fever (temperature above 38 °C or 100.4 °F)
- › Fever, aches, or pain after a COVID-19 or flu shot
- › An infection
- › Surgery
- › Vomiting
- › Diarrhea
- › The flu
- › A severe (very bad) cold
- › Any illness that stops you from doing your usual activities

Remember: During these stressful times, you need to take 2 times the amount of cortisol medication you usually take for at least 3 days. Once you are feeling better, go back to your usual dose.

There may be times when you do not feel well because you are physically tired or emotionally stressed.

- › **Usually, you do not need to take more than your regular dose at these times, but it is important to remember to take your regular dose.**
- › If you are not sure, it is better to take 2 times your usual dose. **Taking too much for a short time will not harm you.**

What if I am not able to take my medication?

- If you are too sick to take your medication, or if you keep vomiting, you must inject cortisol (Solu-Cortef®) using a needle.
 - › You **and** someone you live with should learn how to give this injection.
- You will not cause any harm by giving an injection of Solu-Cortef® that you later find out you did not need.

- Missing a dose of your usual steroid hormone replacements can be life-threatening.
- It is important that you take the missed dose as soon as you remember.
- Then go to the nearest Emergency Department or call your primary health care provider right away.
- You will always need a high dose in any stressful situation (like having surgery or being in a serious accident).

MedicAlert™

You must wear a MedicAlert™ bracelet or tag at all times so that Emergency Department staff will know you have adrenal insufficiency.



Notes:

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:
www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

Prepared by: Halifax Neuropituitary Program, QE II
Illustration by: LifeART Super Anatomy 1 Images; Emergency 2,
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