

Central Adrenal Insufficiency after Cancer Treatment

Some people who were treated for cancer during childhood may develop endocrine (hormone) problems as a result of changes in the function of a complex system of glands known as the endocrine system.

What is the endocrine system?

The endocrine system is a group of glands that regulates many body functions including growth, puberty, energy level, urine production, and stress response. Glands of the endocrine system include the pituitary, hypothalamus, thyroid, pancreas, adrenals, ovaries (in females), and testes (in males). The hypothalamus and pituitary are sometimes called the “master glands” because they control many of the other glands in the endocrine system. Unfortunately, some treatments given for childhood cancer can damage the endocrine system, resulting in a variety of problems.

What are hormones?

Hormones are chemical messengers that carry information from the endocrine glands through the bloodstream to the body's cells. The endocrine system makes many hormones (such as growth hormone, sex hormones, adrenal and thyroid hormones) that work together to maintain specific bodily functions.

What is central adrenal insufficiency?

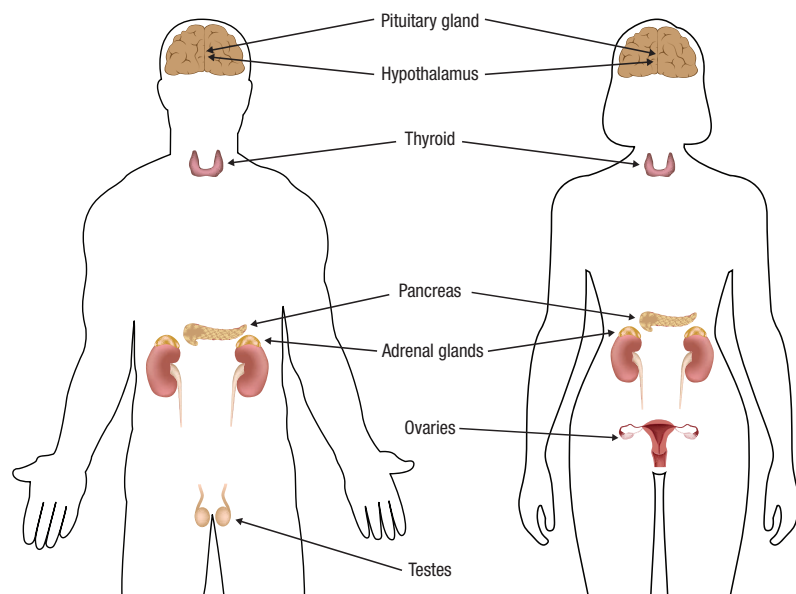
Central adrenal insufficiency is caused by a deficiency of the pituitary hormone known as Adrenocorticotropic Hormone (ACTH). The adrenal glands (located on top of the kidneys) are stimulated by ACTH to produce a hormone known as cortisol. If the pituitary gland doesn't make enough ACTH, then cortisol will not be made by the adrenal gland. Cortisol is important for health because it helps to keep the blood sugar at a normal level and helps the body deal with physical stress, such as fevers or injuries.

What are the risk factors for central adrenal insufficiency?

- Radiation to the brain, especially in higher doses (30 Gy or 3000 cGy/rads or higher)
- Surgical removal of the pituitary gland

What are the symptoms of central adrenal insufficiency?

Under normal circumstances, there may be no symptoms at all, or there may be mild symptoms, such as fatigue, weakness, poor appetite, or dizziness. However, under stressful circumstances, such as fever, infection, surgery, or injury, symptoms may become severe, and may include vomiting, diarrhea, low blood sugar, and dehydration.



What screening is recommended?

People who had radiation in a dose of 30 Gy (3000 cGy/rads) or higher to the central area of the brain (hypothalamic-pituitary axis) should have a yearly blood test to check the cortisol level or yearly evaluation by an endocrinologist (hormone specialist). Anyone who is having symptoms suggestive of central adrenal insufficiency should also have an evaluation by an endocrinologist.

How is central adrenal insufficiency treated?

Central adrenal insufficiency is treated with hydrocortisone, a medication that is given by mouth every day on a regular schedule. In times of increased stress, such as illness or surgery, the dose of hydrocortisone is increased and can be administered by injection if necessary. If you have central adrenal insufficiency, you should wear a medical alert bracelet so that in case of an accident or sudden illness, emergency medical workers will be aware of your special health needs.

Written by Debra A. Kent, RN, MSN, CPNP, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, Cincinnati, OH; and Wendy Landier, PhD, CPNP, Children's Hospital of Alabama, Birmingham, AL.

Reviewed by Charles A. Sklar, MD; Smita Bhatia, MD, MPH; Melissa M. Hudson, MD; and Susan F. Shaw, RN, MS, PNP

Additional health information for childhood cancer survivors is available at www.survivorshipguidelines.org

Note: Throughout this *Health Links* series, the term “childhood cancer” is used to designate pediatric cancers that may occur during childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood. Health Links are designed to provide health information for survivors of pediatric cancer, regardless of whether the cancer occurred during childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood.

Disclaimer and Notice of Proprietary Rights

Introduction to Late Effects Guidelines and Health Links: *The Long-Term Follow-Up Guidelines for Survivors of Childhood, Adolescent, and Young Adult Cancers and accompanying Health Links* were developed by the Children's Oncology Group as a collaborative effort of the Late Effects Committee and Nursing Discipline and are maintained and updated by the Children's Oncology Group's Long-Term Follow-Up Guidelines Core Committee and its associated Task Forces.

To cancer patients (if children, their parents or legal guardians): Please seek the advice of a physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition and do not rely on the Informational Content. The Children's Oncology Group is a research organization and does not provide individualized medical care or treatment.

To physicians and other healthcare providers: The Informational Content is not intended to replace your independent clinical judgment, medical advice, or to exclude other legitimate criteria for screening, health counseling, or intervention for specific complications of childhood cancer treatment. Neither is the Informational Content intended to exclude other reasonable alternative follow-up procedures. The Informational Content is provided as a courtesy, but not intended as a sole source of guidance in the evaluation of childhood cancer survivors. The Children's Oncology Group recognizes that specific patient care decisions are the prerogative of the patient, family, and healthcare provider.

No endorsement of any specific tests, products, or procedures is made by Informational Content, the Children's Oncology Group, or affiliated party or member of the Children's Oncology Group.

No Claim to Accuracy or Completeness: While the Children's Oncology Group has made every attempt to assure that the Informational Content is accurate and complete as of the date of publication, no warranty or representation, express or implied, is made as to the accuracy, reliability, completeness, relevance, or timeliness of such Informational Content.

No Liability on Part of Children's Oncology Group and Related Parties/Agreement to Indemnify and Hold Harmless the Children's Oncology Group and Related Parties: No liability is assumed by the Children's Oncology Group or any affiliated party or member thereof for damage resulting from the use, review, or access of the Informational Content. You agree to the following terms of indemnification: (i) “Indemnified Parties” include authors and contributors to the Informational Content, all officers, directors, representatives, employees, agents, and members of the Children's Oncology Group and affiliated organizations; (ii) by using, reviewing, or accessing the Informational Content, you agree, at your own expense, to indemnify, defend and hold harmless Indemnified Parties from any and all losses, liabilities, or damages (including attorneys' fees and costs) resulting from any and all claims, causes of action, suits, proceedings, or demands related to or arising out of use, review or access of the Informational Content.

Proprietary Rights: The Informational Content is subject to protection under the copyright law and other intellectual property law in the United States and worldwide. The Children's Oncology Group retains exclusive copyright and other right, title, and interest to the Informational Content and claims all intellectual property rights available under law. You hereby agree to help the Children's Oncology Group secure all copyright and intellectual property rights for the benefit of the Children's Oncology Group by taking additional action at a later time, action which could include signing consents and legal documents and limiting dissemination or reproduction of Informational Content.