

Endocrine Problems after Childhood Cancer: Central Adrenal Insufficiency

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, adrenals, pancreas, 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?

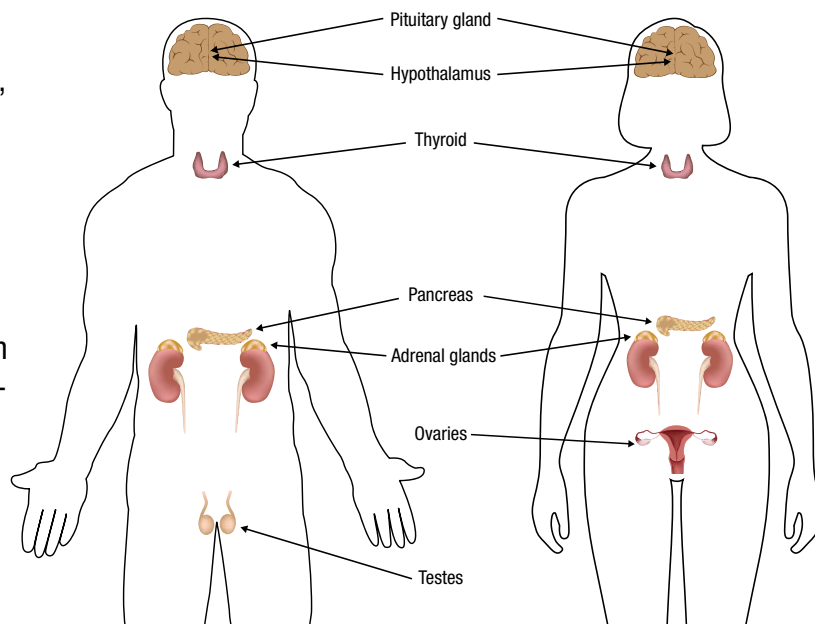
Central adrenal insufficiency is caused by a deficiency of the pituitary hormone known as Adrenocorticotropic Hormone (ACTH). The adrenal glands (located on top of the kidneys) are stimulated by ACTH to produce a hormone known as cortisol. If the pituitary gland doesn't make enough ACTH, then cortisol 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.
- 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 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.

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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.

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