



energise your life

Tiredness, nervous exhaustion and physical weakness are typical symptoms of adrenal fatigue, often caused by a hard-driven lifestyle, excessive work and inadequate recovery. While ‘quick fixes’ such as energy drinks, coffee and sugary snacks are tempting, they’ll just deplete your energy further. Naturopath, Paul Keogh, explains how Chinese herbs can help replenish your energy levels and prevent burnout.

Quick fixes

‘Quick fixes’ like energy drinks, coffee and sugary snacks all have a rebound or ‘crash and burn’ effect. They offer a brief pick-me-up, followed by an abrupt energy slump and can even exacerbate adrenal fatigue long-term.

Energy drinks are not a new phenomenon. In 1886 Coca-Cola was launched as a ‘cure-all’ beverage containing the stimulant ingredients kola nuts and coca leaves, with added caffeine and sugar to boost energy. Today the market has exploded with numerous brands of energy drinks readily available for purchase in virtually every Australian supermarket or convenience store. A typical formula includes high levels of caffeine, sugar and synthetic ingredients such as flavours, sweeteners and other additives. Many energy drinks also include so called ‘active’ ingredients such as guarana or taurine. Herbal ingredients used in energy drinks, such as guarana, don’t have to meet the same quality

standards as those used in complementary medicines, so consumers cannot be confident they are getting exactly what the label indicates. Furthermore, these herbal extracts are usually at low doses and are therefore unlikely to provide any therapeutic benefits.

Energy drinks contain anywhere between 80 – 300mg of caffeine per serve and research shows that high consumption can cause health problems including high blood pressure, increased heart rate, heart palpitations, anxiety, nervousness, irritability and insomnia. Caffeine directly causes these symptoms by overstimulating the nervous system and plays a major role in the development of adrenal fatigue.

The high levels of sugar contained in energy drinks are also cause for concern, leading to rapid spikes in blood sugar and inevitable drops shortly afterward. Sugar overload stresses your body’s capacity to regulate blood glucose, contributing to insulin resistance, weight gain

and eventually, reduced energy levels.

The price of a typical energy drink could cost you five to ten times that of a single dose of a quality herbal formulation, and much more than that in terms of health.

Fatigue and burnout

Fatigue is extremely widespread in our society, affecting up to 80 per cent of the adult population. Chronic stress is the most common cause, while lack of rest, sleep deprivation and poor diet often exacerbate the problem. Your body reacts to stress with a ‘fight or flight’ response. Here the sympathetic nervous system triggers the adrenal glands to release stress hormones into the bloodstream especially cortisol. Prolonged stress can overstimulate your adrenal glands leading to excessive cortisol production and consequent health problems including high blood pressure and cholesterol.

Cortisol, known as the ‘stress hormone’, plays an important role in regulating resistance to physical and mental stress as well as your blood glucose levels, immune function, inflammation and fat metabolism. When stress is short lived, blood cortisol levels peak to enhance performance then quickly return to normal. However, prolonged stress can deplete the adrenals resulting in suboptimal blood cortisol levels and characteristic symptoms of ‘burnout’, as follows:

- Tiredness, lethargy, and generally feeling ‘unwell’
- Poor stress resistance and feeling overwhelmed
- Poor mental performance and concentration
- Muscular weakness, poor physical performance, exercise intolerance and low pain threshold
- Nervous exhaustion, anxiety, irritability and low libido
- Insomnia and unrefreshed sleep
- Poor immunity, recurrent infection and slow recovery
- Weight gain and cravings for sweet or salty foods

How can herbs help?

Traditional Chinese and Ayurvedic herbs can help prevention of and recovery from adrenal fatigue. Specific energy tonic herbs (also known as ‘adaptogens’) optimise physical and mental performance, economise energy production and enhance recovery during rest. Adaptogens work by enhancing the body’s adaptive energy and economising physiological responses to stress. By helping to maintain the optimal stress response, they support the adrenal glands and tonify the nervous system, improving stress resistance.

From a Chinese medicine perspective, the concept of ‘adaptive energy’ is equivalent to ‘vital force’ or *Qi* (pronounced ‘chee’). Adrenal fatigue

correlates to *Qi* deficiency. Adequate *Qi* depends on the body’s reserves of strong inherited *Qi* called *Jing*, which is stored in the Kidney organ-meridian system. Herbal adaptogens work to generate healthy *Qi*, supplement *Jing* and tonify the organ-meridian systems involved in transformation and transportation of *Qi*. The Kidney organ-meridian system is particularly important as it governs the adrenal cortex and autonomic nervous system. Herbs with Kidney tonifying effects are essential to the success of any formula treating insufficient or deficient adaptive energy.

Cordyceps sinensis (Chinese caterpillar

Lifestyle tips

- Consume a balanced diet that sustains energy levels rather than provides an artificial lift. The best choices are natural or minimally processed foods, which tend to be nutrient dense and low GI.
- Exercise boosts energy, alleviates stress and improves sleep quality.
- Practice good time management – writing lists or keeping a diary can help you tackle the tasks at hand in a productive way, helping you to feel calm and organised.
- Make time for rest, relaxation and sleep.

If you are suffering from long term, unexplained fatigue it is important to consult a healthcare practitioner to assess whether there may be a more serious underlying problem that requires treatment.

Panax ginseng (Korean ginseng) is one of the best known energy tonics in traditional Chinese medicine. Research shows it improves athletic performance, alertness and co-ordination. Traditionally, *Panax ginseng* and *Astragalus membranaceus* (astragalus) are combined as a synergistic pair to treat *Qi* deficiency by tonifying the Kidney, Spleen, Stomach and Lung organ-meridians to augment the *Qi*. They work together to enhance energy production and modulate the immune system.

Withania somnifera (Indian ginseng or ashwagandha) is a highly respected Ayurvedic herb with profound adaptogenic and tonic activity together with calming, immune modulating and cognitive enhancing properties. Energetically, withania benefits the *Qi* and fortifies Kidney-meridian energy or *Jing* in deficiency states presenting as general debility, overwork, low sexual vitality, nervous exhaustion, muscular weakness, poor memory, anaemia and fatigue.

Eleutherococcus senticosus (Siberian ginseng) is another highly respected adaptogen. Research shows it improves physical performance, increases stamina and enhances recovery. It also helps to regulate blood sugar levels, immune function and improves blood flow to the brain. *Panax quinquefolium* (American ginseng) enhances mental performance, relaxes the nervous system and modulates immune function. Energetically, both these herbs tonify *Qi*, strengthen *Jing* and nourish Kidney *Yin*.

Ganoderma lucidum (Reishi mushroom) is an adaptogen with profound immune modulating effects. It also reinforces the *Qi* tonifying effects of the other herbs.

Paul Keogh is the executive and technical director for Global Therapeutics P/L trading as Fusion Health. Paul is a qualified naturopath and medical herbalist with 25 years combined experience in clinical practice and the development of integrated Chinese and western herbal medicines.



Clockwise: Astragalus root, Korean ginseng, Reishi mushroom.