

Addison's Disease

PATIENT INFORMATION

About Addison's Disease

Addison's disease results when the adrenal glands do not work properly. The adrenal glands are small triangular shaped glands that sit on top of each kidney. Each adrenal gland has a cortex (outer portion) and a medulla (inner portion). The cortex and the medulla supply the body with several different hormones. Addison's disease results when the cortex fails to produce the hormones aldosterone and cortisol or when the adrenal glands have been surgically removed.

The long-term use of steroids can cause the adrenal glands to shrink in size and produce inadequate amounts of cortisol, resulting in a condition similar to Addison's disease.

Symptoms of Addison's Disease

- Low blood pressure, low blood sugar, low blood sodium
- High blood potassium
- Muscle weakness, lack of energy
- Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea
- Skin color changes to tan or brown (except after long-term use of steroids)

How It is Diagnosed

Addison's disease is diagnosed by blood tests and 24-hour urine collections. Blood tests and urine tests look for a low blood cortisol level.

Treatment for Addison's Disease

Diet: You will need to follow a high sodium and low potassium diet in order to restore your sodium and water balance.

Medication: Medications such as prednisone or dexamethasone (substitutes for hydrocortisone) and florinef (a substitute for aldosterone) are required for hormone replacement. This medicine will need to be taken for the rest of your life. You must wear a Medic Alert bracelet or necklace and carry an identification card with you that says you have Addison's disease and lists the medicines you are taking and your doctor's phone number. You should also have in your home and car and in your purse or on your person a pre-loaded syringe containing dexamethasone to use in emergencies. Check expiration date on the syringe and replace when necessary.

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Prevent Complications: Addisonian crisis is a complication of Addison's disease. You will need to learn the early signs and what to do if they occur:

- nausea
- vomiting
- fever
- dizziness, light-headedness, which may be symptoms of a sudden drop in blood pressure

If these symptoms occur, take an injection of Decadron (dexamethasone) immediately and call your doctor.

By taking medicine as prescribed and following dietary guidelines the person with Addison's disease can lead a normal life.

Important phone numbers: