



Health Letter, July 2008

A Personal Energy Crisis

The summer of 2008 has brought more national and global awareness to the cost of fuel than at any time in the past 30 years. This summer, I can tell you how much a barrel of crude oil costs without looking it up, because it is on the news headlines every day. That was certainly not in my daily awareness a year ago. But now we wonder where the energy is going to come from to run our cars, homes, and offices.

What about your personal energy? Do you go through a lot of days feeling out of gas? Running on empty? I saw a toddler last week wearing a T-shirt that said "My parents are exhausted." We can smile ruefully at that wry humor because we all know what that feels like.

If you are having an energy crisis, you are not alone. Americans are working longer hours, sleeping less, and leaving the lights on longer than before. We seldom slow down during the day, eat on the run, and feel we have to apologize for taking a break. Stress and fatigue are becoming the "national malaise" (Jimmy Carter became known for his "malaise" speech during the last energy crisis.)

But sometimes fatigue is worse than what we bring on ourselves with the hectic American lifestyle. Serious medical issues can show themselves first as fatigue; maladies such as thyroid disease, anemia, rheumatologic diseases, or depression for example. I have also seen chronic fatigue syndrome lead to virtual disability in adults as well as teens. Unfortunately, if all conventional medical tests are normal, more than a few patients have been dismissed as malingering. My own practice is to see that my job is not done until my patient is feeling well and energetic again. So if these symptoms describe you, don't resign yourself to continuing to feel bad, call the office for a consult.

What can you do on your own without taking time for an Integrative Medicine consult here? Assuming you have had conventional medical tests to exclude the possibility of serious disease, my recommendations are time tested remedies that people have used for generations with success.

A class of herbs called tonics (or adaptogens) are thought to increase stamina and endurance, decrease fatigue, speed recovery, and improve immunity. Some tried and true examples are Eleuthero, Korean (Panax) Ginseng and American Ginseng, Cordyceps, and Astragalus. Some authorities believe that people with hypertension should use Ginseng only with caution, but

otherwise these can be taken by most people without concern for side effects. Find a reliable brand (look for a USP label or check www.consumerlab.com for tested quality) and use it for 8 to 12 weeks, at which time evaluate its effect: are you completing tasks better, taking initiative, tackling difficult situations without being overwhelmed? If not, take a month off, then try a different herb. You may discover over time which works best for you.

Lifestyle measures will help: sleep at least 7 to 8 hours nightly; get regular physical activity such as a daily 30 minute walk; eat balanced healthy meals instead of high carbohydrate meals on the run; and pause for 10 minutes daily to practice some form of meditation such as simple breath awareness. Pause at frequent intervals through the day and notice your breathing: are you holding your breath in your chest, with shallow rapid breathing (associated with fatigue); if so, drop your shoulders, squeeze all the breath out, then take a long relaxing breath in. Consciously shifting to belly breathing will change your body chemistry and make exhaustion less likely. All these measures can shift the system away from exhaustion to renewal.

Energy is life. If yours is running low, stop and fill your personal energy tank before you completely run out of gas!

Be well, and stay in touch.

Robert Pendergrast, MD, MPH
www.aikenaugustaholistichealth.com
www.realfoodsthatheal.com