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EXCLUSIVE

AUDREY HEPBURN'S GRANDDAUGHTER PHOTOGRAPHED BY AVEDON'S GRANDSON

NEW ANTI-AGING STRESS RELIEVERS

Do you need to take adaptogens?

Liz Krieger investigates.

HOW DO YOU FEEL?

Perhaps you're a bit tired, slightly stressed, even a bit haggard. Well, you're in good company. Our faster, more connected world is taking its toll, and suddenly everyone from your holistic doctor to your personal trainer is talking about how adrenal exhaustion may be the reason you're run-down—and touting new herbal supplements known as adaptogens as a miracle treatment. The adrenal glands, which sit atop the kidneys, produce a number of key hormones—including estrogen, cortisol, adrenaline, and aldosterone—that help the body deal with stress, regulate metabolism, and control blood pressure. So while the medical community is in agreement on how critical the adrenals are to overall health, the idea that the glands can become overworked to the point of exhaustion because of day-to-day stress is a matter of serious debate among mainstream physicians. It's mainly the practitioners of Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine (and medical doctors with a foot in both worlds) who have investigated herbs as a treatment. Chronic stress, along with poor eating habits, dehydration, not enough sleep, and even overtaxing fitness routines, can cause your adrenal glands to fail to work efficiently, says Susan Blum, a functional medicine physician and founder of the Blum Center for Health in Rye Brook, New York. "For a long time your adrenals will keep up, pumping out hormones like cortisol and adrenaline that help the body cope with stress," she explains. "But over time—and this period can vary from person to person—they become depleted," meaning they can't keep up with the body's demand for hormones. Certain adaptogenic herbs, like ginseng and rhodiola, when combined with a healthy diet, lifestyle, and exercise regimen, can change everything for those looking for help, says Frank Lipman, an integrative and functional medicine doctor in New York (Gwyneth Paltrow and Donna Karan are fans). To evaluate adrenal functioning, Blum often uses saliva testing, which measures how much cortisol, a.k.a. the stress hormone, is coursing through your body at four critical times during a 24-hour period. When your body is out of whack, she notes, cortisol levels can become chronically low during the day, then spike at night, disturbing much needed sleep. "Your adrenal glands are a sum of how you're taking care of yourself," says Lipman. "Burn the candle at both ends, and this is where it can show up." Robert Vigersky, a Maryland endocrinologist and former president of the Endocrine Society, has a different opinion. "There is no evidence that your adrenals conk out because of stress," he says. As for the saliva tests, alone they have very little diagnostic value, says endocrinologist and stress researcher George Chrousos of Greece's University of Athens Medical School, who believes that attributing symptoms only to adrenal issues may mean missing out on underlying conditions, such as depression or sleep apnea. When people speak about adrenal exhaustion, it's just another way of saying "brain exhaustion," says Chrousos. Doctor debates aside, patients have seen benefits. Andrea Burke, 39, of Los Angeles, went to several doctors to pinpoint the cause of her weight gain, fatigue, sleep problems, and noticeably dull skin, but they all came up empty—or prescribed medications that just masked her symptoms. Burke also tried acupuncture and cupping but to no avail. She finally turned to an East West Essentials clinic, which counts celebrities like Jennifer Lopez as clients, and was told that her adrenals had been depleted. A key part of her treatment: a few teaspoons of powdered adaptogenic herbs, mixed with water, twice a day. The formula, Optimal Repair blend (\$86), promises to help the adrenals better adapt and regain strength. Followers of Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine have long relied on these herbs (including ginseng, ashwagandha, licorice, holy basil, rhodiola, and schizandra berry) to help the body handle stress, says Heather Wilson, a holistic nutritionist and a cofounder of East West Essentials. Within a month of starting the herbal regimen, Burke says, she felt an immense change. "My skin was the first thing; it was glowing," she says. Adds Lipman, who has his own line of adaptogens capsules called Be Well (\$40), "We don't really understand how these herbs work, but clinically we see how effective they are." And believers are resolute. "Many doctors just don't know about this stuff," says Burke. "I'm trying to think outside the box. And it changed my life." ■