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Overview

Addison's disease

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Addison's disease is a rare disorder of the adrenal glands. It is also known as primary adrenal insufficiency or hypoadrenalism.

The adrenal glands are 2 small glands that sit on top of the kidneys. They produce 2 essential hormones: cortisol and aldosterone.

The adrenal gland is damaged in Addison's disease. This means it does not produce enough cortisol or aldosterone.

It can affect people of any age, although it's most common between the ages of 30 to 50. It's also more common in women than men.

Symptoms of Addison's disease

Early symptoms of Addison's disease are like other more common health conditions. For example [depression](#) or [flu](#).

You may experience:

- lack of energy or motivation (fatigue)
- muscle weakness
- low mood
- loss of appetite and unintentional weight loss
- increased thirst

Over time, these problems may become more severe. You may experience further symptoms, such as dizziness, fainting, cramps and exhaustion. You may also develop small areas of darkened skin, or darkened lips or gums.

These symptoms are not always caused by Addison's disease. But you should see a GP so they can

be investigated.

[Symptoms of Addison's disease](#)

Causes of Addison's disease

The condition is usually the result of a problem with the immune system. It causes it to attack the outer layer of the adrenal gland (the adrenal cortex). This disrupts the production of the steroid hormones aldosterone and cortisol.

It's not clear why this happens, but it's responsible for 70% to 90% of cases in Ireland.

Other causes include conditions that can damage the adrenal glands, such as tuberculosis (TB). But this is not common in Ireland.

[Causes of Addison's disease](#)

Treating Addison's disease

Addison's disease is treated with medication to replace the missing hormones. You'll need to take the medication for the rest of your life.

With treatment, symptoms of Addison's disease can be controlled. Most people with the condition have a normal lifespan. They are able to live an active life with few limitations.

But many people with Addison's disease also find they must learn to manage bouts of fatigue. There may also be related health conditions, like diabetes or an underactive thyroid.

People with Addison's disease must be aware of the risk of their symptoms suddenly getting worse. This could be an adrenal crisis. This can happen when the levels of cortisol in your body fall significantly.

An adrenal crisis is a medical emergency. If left untreated, it can be fatal.

Dial 999 or 112 for an ambulance if:

- you are experiencing an adrenal crisis

Adrenal crisis, or Addisonian crisis, needs urgent medical attention.

[Treatment for Addison's disease](#)

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