

# Cushing's Syndrome

Patient guide — understanding, diagnosing, and treating excess cortisol

## What Is Cushing's Syndrome?

Cushing's syndrome occurs when your body is exposed to too much cortisol over an extended period. This can be caused by a tumor in the pituitary gland (Cushing's disease), a tumor in the adrenal gland, a tumor elsewhere in the body, or — most commonly — long-term use of corticosteroid medications like prednisone.

## Common Signs and Symptoms

- **Weight gain:** Especially in the abdomen, face ("moon face"), and upper back ("buffalo hump")
- **Stretch marks:** Wide, purple stretch marks on the abdomen, thighs, arms
- **Facial changes:** Rounding and redness of the face
- **Skin changes:** Easy bruising, thin fragile skin, slow wound healing
- **Muscle weakness:** Especially in upper arms and thighs — difficulty climbing stairs
- **Bone loss:** Osteoporosis and fractures
- **High blood pressure:** Often difficult to control
- **High blood sugar:** Can develop into diabetes
- **Mood changes:** Anxiety, depression, irritability
- **In women:** Irregular or absent periods, excess hair growth (hirsutism)
- **In men:** Low libido, erectile dysfunction

## How It Is Diagnosed

Diagnosis requires multiple tests because cortisol levels fluctuate normally. Your doctor may order:

- 24-hour urine free cortisol collection (see separate handout)
- Late-night salivary cortisol (collected at 11 PM–midnight)
- Overnight dexamethasone suppression test (a blood test the morning after taking a pill)
- Blood cortisol levels
- MRI of the pituitary or CT of the adrenal glands once cortisol excess is confirmed

## Treatment

Cause	Primary Treatment
Pituitary tumor (Cushing's disease)	Transsphenoidal surgery (through the nose)

Adrenal tumor	Surgical removal of the adrenal gland
Ectopic tumor (lung, etc.)	Treat the underlying tumor
Steroid medications	Gradual dose reduction under doctor supervision

**Recovery:** Many symptoms of Cushing's resolve after successful treatment, but it can take months to years for full recovery. Follow-up with your endocrinologist is essential even after treatment.