Salivary Cortisol Response to ACTH Stimulation Is a Reliable Alternative to Serum Cortisol in Evaluating Hypoadrenalism

Nadia El-Farhan, Sarah Tennant, Seren E. Rees, Carol Evans, and D. Aled Rees

1Department of Medical Biochemistry, Royal Gwent Hospital, Newport NP20 2UB, UK
2Department of Medical Biochemistry, Immunology and Toxicology, University Hospital of Wales, Cardiff CF14 4XW, UK
3Birmingham Medical School, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK
4Neuroscience and Mental Health Innovation Institute, School of Medicine, Cardiff University, Cardiff CF14 4XN, UK

Correspondence: Aled Rees, PhD, FRCP, Neuroscience and Mental Health Research Institute, School of Medicine, Cardiff University, Heath Park, Cardiff CF24 4HQ, UK. Email: reesda@cf.ac.uk.

Abstract

Context: The serum total cortisol response to the ACTH stimulation test is widely used to assess adrenocortical function but is affected by changes in cortisol-binding globulin (CBG) concentration. Salivary cortisol reflects free cortisol concentrations and may offer a reliable alternative.

Objectives: (1) To establish the salivary cortisol response to ACTH stimulation in healthy volunteers and patients with altered CBG concentrations; (2) to evaluate the performance of a lower reference limit (LRL) determined in healthy volunteers in patients with suspected hypoadrenalism (SH-patients).

Design: A 250 µg ACTH stimulation test was undertaken in 139 healthy volunteers, 24 women taking an estradiol-containing oral contraceptive pill (OCP-females), 10 patients with low serum protein concentration (LP-patients), and 30 SH-patients. Salivary cortisol was measured by liquid chromatography-tandem mass spectrometry. Mean and LRL of the 30-minute salivary cortisol response (mean—1.96 standard deviation) were derived from log-transformed concentrations. The LRL was applied as a diagnostic cut-off in SH-patients, with comparison to the serum response.

Results: Mean CBG concentrations (range) were 58 (42-81) mg/L, 64 (43-95) mg/L, 41 (28-60) mg/L and 116 (84-159) mg/L in males, females, LP-patients, and OCP-females, respectively. The mean 30-minute salivary cortisol concentration was 19.3 (2.5th-97.5th percentile 10.3-36.2) nmol/L in healthy volunteers. Corresponding values were not different in OCP-females [19.7 (9.5-41.2) nmol/L; P = .59] or LP-patients [19.0 (7.7-46.9) nmol/L; P = .97]. Overall diagnostic agreement between salivary and serum responses in SH-patients was 79%.

Conclusion: Salivary cortisol response to ACTH stimulation offers a reliable alternative to serum and may be especially useful in conditions of altered CBG concentration.

Key Words: Synacthen, ACTH stimulation test, cortisol, saliva, estrogen, cirrhosis

The ACTH stimulation test [synthetic (1-24) ACTH (Synacthen®)] is the most widely used test of adrenal glucocorticoid reserve (1, 2). Most commonly, the test uses a 250-microgram dose to stimulate a cortisol response, with measurement of serum cortisol values at baseline and 30 minutes after intravenous injection. Applying diagnostic thresholds allows reliable discrimination of hypoadrenalism from normative responses, although we and others have shown that such cut-offs are highly method dependent (3-5). Difficulties remain, however, in assessing hypoadrenalism in patients with disorders of protein concentration (6, 7), where total serum cortisol concentrations are affected by changes in carrier protein [cortisol-binding globulin (CBG) and albumin] synthesis, leading to potential misdiagnosis. A variety of conditions may affect protein synthesis: cirrhosis, nephrotic syndrome, malnutrition, and critical illness may all reduce it, whereas estrogen (eg, in pregnancy or in combined oral contraceptives) increases it. Clinicians are thus faced with challenges in making an accurate diagnosis of hypoadrenalism in such circumstances, while patients taking estrogen therapy may be faced with the inconvenience of discontinuing treatment for several weeks in order for a reliable assessment of adrenal reserve to be made.

Free cortisol represents the biologically active unbound fraction and accounts for 5% to 10% of total serum cortisol. Analysis of free cortisol has been shown to overcome the challenges presented by conditions of altered protein synthesis in the diagnosis of hypoadrenalism (8), but direct measurement is labor-intensive, time-consuming, and expensive, limiting its utility in the routine laboratory setting. Calculated free cortisol measurement using validated equations has also been proposed but may be unreliable in critical illness (9). Salivary cortisol measurement is an attractive alternative as it is unbound and in equilibrium with circulating free cortisol (10). Previous studies have assessed salivary cortisol responses to ACTH stimulation in healthy volunteers and patients...
(11-19), yet few studies have analyzed the utility of salivary measurement in patients with altered protein concentrations, and many have been limited by relatively small sample sizes. Furthermore, only a few studies have reported CBG concentrations (19-22). We therefore sought to evaluate salivary and serum cortisol responses to the high-dose ACTH stimulation test in a large sample of healthy volunteers, in addition to comparing responses in patients with disordered protein synthesis and patients with confirmed or suspected hypoadrenalism.

Subjects and Methods

Subjects

One hundred thirty-nine healthy volunteers [60 male, 79 female; mean age (range) 37.1 (22-62) years and 40.7 (20-66) years, respectively] were recruited from staff at the University Hospital of Wales and Cardiff University. Exclusion criteria included pregnancy and breastfeeding, use of estrogen-containing medication, significant intercurrent disease, a history of thyroid or other autoimmune disease, previous sensitivity to ACTH testing, asthma or an allergic disorder, and treatment with corticosteroids. An additional 24 healthy female volunteers [28.7 (21-40) years] taking an estrogen-containing oral contraceptive pill, containing between 20 and 35 micrograms of ethinylestradiol were recruited, along with 10 patients [7 male, 3 female; 57.4 (42-78) years] with recently diagnosed, untreated nephrotic syndrome (n = 1) or established liver cirrhosis (n = 9) mean albumin concentration 30.3 g/L (range 29-34)]. Thirty patients with established or suspected adrenal insufficiency [13 male, 17 female; 52.4 (23-82) years] were recruited from endocrine clinics at the University Hospital of Wales. Patients were stratified into high, low, or intermediate likelihood of hypoadrenalism, based on our clinical judgement and derived from risk factors for hypoadrenalism identified in their medical and medication history. These included pre-existing Addison’s disease or pan-hypopituitarism, adenalec-tomy, pituitary adenoma with or without partial hypopituitarism, symptoms of hypoadrenalism, other autoimmune disease, hydrocortisone and/or fludrocortisone replacement, oral or inhaled glucocorticoids, and other medications known to affect the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis. The presence of multiple different risk factors was also taken into account when assigning risk category.

The study protocol was approved by the South East Wales Research Ethics Committee, Cardiff University (study sponsor) and the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Authority. All subjects provided written informed consent before study commencement.

Sample Collection and Handling

The Synacthen® tests were undertaken between 08.30 and 11.30 hours. Subjects were not required to fast overnight but were restricted from eating, drinking, or smoking for 30 minutes before the test. There were no restrictions on prior physical exercise, but participants were asked to rest in a sitting position for 15 minutes beforehand and for the duration of the test. Once informed consent had been obtained, subjects were asked to collect a 5 mL saliva sample by passive drooling into a Universal container (Sterilin™ polystyrene 30 mL; Thermo Fisher Scientific Ltd., Loughborough, UK). An indwelling catheter was inserted into a superficial antecubital vein and 20 mL of blood was collected. A 250 µg bolus of synthetic ACTH$_{1-24}$ (Tetracosactide) (Synacthen, Alliance Pharmaceuticals Ltd., Wiltshire, UK) was then administered intravenously. Thirty minutes later a further 20 mL of blood was collected and subjects were asked to collect a second 5 mL saliva sample. Further details of simultaneous blood collection, serum handling, and analysis have been reported previously (3).

Analytical Methods

Cortisol binding globulin was measured using a manual solid-phase, competitive binding radioimmunoassay in accordance with the manufacturer’s instructions (DiaSource, Nivelles, Belgium; catalog no. KIP1809, RRID:AB_3064898). The intra- and inter-assay coefficients of variation were 7.6% and 12.8%, respectively, at a concentration of 30 mg/L, and 3.1% and 8.7%, respectively, at a concentration of 110 mg/L. Serum cortisol was measured by gas chromatography–mass spectrometry (GC-MS) and the Abbott Architect immunoassay (Abbott Laboratories, Chicago, IL, USA; catalog no. 8D15, RRID:AB_2783639) as described previously (3). Salivary cortisol was measured using an in-house liquid chromatography–tandem mass spectrometry (LC-MS/MS) method. A 250 µL aliquot of saliva, containing 5 nmol/L deuterated cortisol, was extracted with 2 mL of dichloromethane. The tubes were centrifuged for 5 minutes at 4000 rpm and the top aqueous layer was discarded. The solvent phase was evaporated under a gentle stream of nitrogen and the dried extract was reconstituted with 250 µL of mobile phase. A 20 µL volume of this extract was injected into the LC-MS/MS instrument for analysis. The LC-MS/MS instrument was a Premier XE triple quadrupole tandem mass spectrometer (Micromass MS Technologies, Manchester, UK) with an Acquity ultra-performance liquid chromatography system comprising a binary pump and auto-sampler (Waters Ltd, California, USA). The liquid chromatography column was a silica-based reverse-phase C18 (1.7 µm, 2.1 × 50 mm) column (Waters Ltd.), and the chromatographic mobile phases were composed of 2 solutions: (A) deionized water containing 2 mM ammonium acetate and 0.1% v/v formic acid and (B) methanol containing 2 mM ammonium acetate and 0.1% v/v formic acid. The mobile phase was delivered at a flow rate of 0.40 mL/min. The retention time for cortisol and d4-cortisol was 0.95 minutes, and the analysis time for each sample was 4.5 minutes. The tandem mass spectrometry was operated with electrospray ionization source and Z-spray interface and selected reaction monitoring mode, monitoring at a mass to charge ratio (m/z) of 363.3 transitioning to 121.1 (363.3 > 121.2) for cortisol and 365.3 to 121.2 (365.3 > 121.2) for d2-cortisol. Data acquisition and quantitation of cortisol levels were achieved using MassLynx NT and QuanLynx (Waters Ltd.) software, respectively. The limit of quantitation was 1 nmol/L. The intra- and inter-assay coefficients of variation were 5.6% and 6.0%, respectively, at a concentration of 1.2 nmol/L, 2.3% and 5.8%, respectively, at 5.4 nmol/L and 3.0% and 3.8%, respectively, at 15.1 nmol/L.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS versions 16.0, 19.0 and 23.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA, and IBM Corporation, New York, NY, USA). The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to determine whether data were normally distributed. Since the...
distributional form was found to vary by time point and sex, all data were log-transformed before analysis. A mean salivary cortisol concentration was determined at each time point, and a lower reference limit calculated from the mean cortisol concentration at 30 minutes as the 2.5th percentile. These values were then back-transformed to generate the geometric mean, 2.5th and 97.5th centile values, and lower reference limits presented here. Comparisons between means were made using paired and unpaired t-tests or the Mann-Whitney U test where data remained non-parametric following log transformation. Results from patients with known Addison’s disease (and undetectable serum cortisol) were excluded from calculations of the mean to avoid introducing negative bias to comparisons between patients with suspected hypoadrenalism and healthy volunteers. In all cases, differences were considered to be significant when \( P < .05 \).

Results
Baseline Salivary Cortisol
Baseline salivary cortisol was not normally distributed in male or female volunteers or in women taking an estrogen-containing oral contraceptive pill (OCP-females) but was normally distributed in patients with low protein concentrations (LP-patients) (data not shown). There was no significant concentration difference between male and female volunteers (Table 1) and no age effect \(( P = .43)\).

The concentration range of the untransformed data was wide in all groups: 0.6 to 12.0 nmol/L in men, 0.8 to 9.2 nmol/L in women, 1.5 to 12.4 nmol/L in OCP-females, and 1.5 to 16.9 nmol/L in LP-patients. Mean baseline concentrations, calculated after log-transformation, were significantly higher in OCP-females and LP-patients than in healthy volunteers (respectively 5.1 nmol/L, 5.3 nmol/L, and 2.9 nmol/L; both \( P < .01 \)) (Table 2; Fig. 1).

Post-ACTH Salivary Cortisol
Post-ACTH salivary cortisol was not normally distributed in healthy volunteers and in OCP-females, while LP-patient values remained normally distributed. Following ACTH stimulation, there was no significant difference in mean salivary cortisol concentration between male and female volunteers (19.1 vs 19.6 nmol/L; \( P = .44 \); Table 1). The wide concentration range of the untransformed data persisted, ranging from 10.5 to 39.7 nmol/L in male volunteers, 10.1 to 34.8 nmol/L in females, 9.0 to 44.2 nmol/L in OCP-females, and 8.0 to 36.0 nmol/L in LP-patients.

In contrast to baseline values, mean post-ACTH salivary cortisol concentrations (calculated after log-transformation) in OCP-females and LP-patients did not differ significantly from healthy volunteers (19.7 nmol/L, 19.0 nmol/L and 19.3 nmol/L, respectively) (Table 2; Fig. 1).

The 2.5th percentile of the combined male and female healthy volunteer response, 10.3 nmol/L, was subsequently taken forward as a cut-off to differentiate between an adequate salivary cortisol response to ACTH stimulation and adrenal insufficiency.

Serum vs Salivary Cortisol Responses to ACTH
In contrast to salivary cortisol, baseline and post-ACTH serum cortisol concentrations were normally distributed in male volunteers, OCP-females, and LP-patients but not in female volunteers. There was no significant difference between baseline serum cortisol concentrations in male and female volunteers with the GC-MS assay \(( P = .19)\), but the slightly lower concentrations in female volunteers were statistically significant when measured by immunoassay \(( P = .02)\). Baseline concentrations in LP-patients were not significantly different to those in healthy volunteers, when measured by either GC-MS or immunoassay \(( P = .11, P = .43\) respectively), but were significantly higher in OCP-females \(( P < .01 \) (Table 3; Fig. 1).

Differences in CBG concentrations are likely to explain some of the observed differences in serum cortisol concentration. As anticipated, mean CBG concentration was lowest in LP-patients \([41 (28-60) \text{ mg/L}; P < .01 \text{ vs male volunteers}]\) followed by male

| Table 1. Geometric mean of baseline and post-ACTH stimulation salivary cortisol concentrations in male and female healthy volunteers |
|-----------------|-----------------|----------|--------------------------|
| Salivary cortisol (nmol/L) | Male (n = 60) | Female (n = 79) | \( P \) value\(^{*} \) | Combined (n = 139) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| 0 minutes | 3.2 (0.8-12.0) | 2.7 (1.0-7.5) | .13 | 2.9 (0.9-9.2) |
| 30 minutes | 19.1 (9.8-37.3) | 19.6 (10.9-36.2) | .44 | 19.3 (10.3-36.2) |

Results are expressed as geometric mean (2.5th—97.5th percentile).

\(^{*}\) \( P \)-value for differences between sexes.

<p>| Table 2. Geometric mean of baseline and post-ACTH stimulation salivary cortisol concentrations in healthy volunteers, women taking a combined oral contraceptive pill, and patients with low protein concentration |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salivary cortisol (nmol/L)</th>
<th>Healthy volunteers (n = 139)</th>
<th>OCP-Females (n = 24)</th>
<th>Low protein patients (n = 10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 minutes</td>
<td>2.9 (0.9-9.2)</td>
<td>5.1 (1.9-14.0) (^{*})</td>
<td>5.3 (1.1-26.2) (^{*})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>19.3 (10.3-36.2)</td>
<td>19.7 (9.5-41.2)</td>
<td>19.0 (7.7-46.9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: OCP-female, females taking the oral contraceptive pill.

Results are expressed as geometric mean (2.5th—97.5th percentile).

\(^{*}\) Indicates a significant difference \(( P \)-value < .05) when compared to concentrations in healthy volunteers at the same time point.
volunteers [58 (42-81) mg/L], female volunteers [64 mg/L (43-95); P < .01 vs male volunteers], and OCP-females [116 (84-159) mg/L; P < .01 vs male volunteers]. There was no significant effect of age on CBG concentration and no difference between CBG concentrations at baseline and post-ACTH (P = .49).

Following ACTH stimulation, mean serum cortisol concentrations were not significantly different between male and female volunteers (P = .91) or LP-patients (P = .85) when measured by GC-MS, although mean concentrations in male volunteers were marginally higher than in female volunteers and LP-patients when measured by immunoassay (P = .01, P = .03, respectively) (Table 3). In contrast, mean serum cortisol concentration was significantly higher in OCP-females (P < .01) than healthy volunteers, whether assessed by GC-MS or immunoassay (P < .01) (Table 3; Fig. 1).

Comparison between baseline salivary and serum cortisol concentrations (all subjects) measured by GC-MS and immunoassay (Fig. 2) showed a moderately positive correlation overall (R² = 0.42 and 0.53, respectively). This relationship was lost post-ACTH stimulation, with little correlation between salivary and serum concentrations when measured by either GC-MS or immunoassay (R² = 0.08 and 0.14, respectively).

Salivary Cortisol Lower Reference Limit as a Diagnostic Cut-off in Patients With Suspected Hypoadrenalism

The validity of the proposed cut-off in defining adequate adrenal function was explored in a group of patients undergoing ACTH stimulation tests as part of their routine clinical care to explore possible hypoadrenalism (suspected hypoadrenalism patients) (Table 4). Each patient was assigned a high, low, or intermediate pretest likelihood of adrenal insufficiency based on our clinical judgement, in addition to undergoing both serum and salivary ACTH tests.

Nine of the 10 patients with a high pretest likelihood of adrenal insufficiency failed the serum ACTH stimulation test; 8 of these also failed the salivary test, and 1 patient was unable to produce sufficient saliva for cortisol measurement. One patient (patient 3) had a high pretest likelihood of adrenal insufficiency but passed both the serum and salivary ACTH stimulation tests. There was 100% agreement between serum and salivary outcomes in this group and 90% agreement with pretest likelihood of disease.

Twelve of the 15 patients with a low pretest likelihood of adrenal insufficiency passed both salivary and serum tests. Patient 21 passed the serum test, with a cortisol concentration of 502 nmol/L (cut-off 430 nmol/L), but marginally failed the salivary test, with a concentration of 9.9 nmol/L (cut-off

Figure 1. Mean salivary and serum cortisol concentrations in male and female volunteers, patients with low serum protein concentration and women taking an oral contraceptive pill at baseline and post-ACTH stimulation. (A) Baseline salivary cortisol concentrations; (B) baseline serum cortisol concentrations; (C) post-ACTH salivary cortisol concentrations; (D) post-ACTH serum cortisol concentrations.
10.3 nmol/L). Two patients (22 and 23) marginally failed the serum test, with cortisol concentrations of 406 nmol/L and 396 nmol/L, respectively, but convincingly passed the salivary test, with concentrations of 16.3 nmol/L and 15.6 nmol/L. Overall agreement between the 2 tests in this group was 80%, with 87% agreement between the serum test and pretest likelihood of disease and 93% agreement with pretest likelihood for the salivary test.

Five patients were classed as being at intermediate likelihood of adrenal insufficiency. Two passed both the serum and salivary ACTH stimulation tests, 2 passed the serum test but failed the salivary test, and 1 patient failed the serum test but passed the salivary test. Agreement between serum and salivary tests in this group was only 40%, although in each of the 3 discordant cases both results were relatively close to the lower reference limit (patient 11: serum cortisol 451 nmol/L, salivary cortisol 8.7 nmol/L; patient 12: serum cortisol 379 nmol/L, salivary cortisol 10.9 nmol/L; and patient 13: serum cortisol 468 nmol/L, salivary cortisol 8.6 nmol/L). The overall pass rate for the serum test was 80% and 60% for the salivary test.

Overall agreement between serum and salivary ACTH stimulation tests in the entire group was 79% (23/29), with 22 of 25 (88%) serum Synacthen tests and 22 of 24 (91.7%) salivary tests showing agreement with pretest likelihood of disease.

Discussion

In this large study of healthy volunteers, including participants with altered CBG concentration, we demonstrate the potential utility of salivary cortisol response to the high-dose ACTH stimulation test in the biochemical evaluation of patients with suspected hypoadrenalism. We confirmed that salivary cortisol responses to ACTH stimulation were unaffected by estrogen treatment, in contrast to corresponding serum values. Furthermore, agreement between salivary and serum diagnostic cut-offs in patients undergoing clinical evaluation for possible hypoadrenalism was high, especially in patients with high or low pretest likelihood of disease. Our observations are consistent with previous studies of salivary cortisol responses to ACTH stimulation (11-19), which have shown excellent diagnostic sensitivity and specificity. We have added to the information available by including a large sample of healthy volunteers, inclusion of participants with altered CBG concentration, and a comparison of diagnostic performance in patients undergoing evaluation for potential adrenal insufficiency in a healthcare setting.

Salivary cortisol measurement offers many advantages over serum measurement, including convenience, noninvasive collection, and avoidance of venepuncture (albeit that Synacthen still needs to be administered intravenously). Samples are stable at room temperature for many weeks (23), and cortisol concentration is independent of salivary flow rate (10). Salivary cortisol also offers the significant benefits of close correlation with unbound (free) serum cortisol and is independent of serum CBG concentration (10, 24). Furthermore, specific measurement of salivary cortisol concentration by LC-MS/MS circumvents the problem of cross-reactivity with other steroids that is commonly observed with immunoassays. We would thus recommend mass spectrometry as the measurement method of choice, accepting that this may be less generally available than immunoassay and more labor intensive.

Previous studies have suggested that the correlation between salivary and serum cortisol may be nonlinear, with an exponential model best explaining this relationship (12). Our observations of a linear association are not inconsistent with these findings, given the relatively weak correlation of 0.42 and 0.53 with GC-MS and immunoassay cortisol, respectively. This is likely best explained by the saturation of CBG binding capacity when total cortisol exceeds 500 nmol/L (12, 25, 26). In agreement, the correlation we observed between serum total cortisol and salivary cortisol at baseline was lost post-ACTH (Fig. 2). In addition, previous reports have shown a poor correlation in the early dynamic phase of the Synacthen test (15), perhaps due to the difficulties of obtaining contemporaneous paired samples.

In contrast to studies in healthy volunteers, only a few studies have examined salivary cortisol responses in patients with altered protein concentration, in whom measurement of total serum cortisol may be unreliable because of disrupted CBG production. Albert et al established reference values for salivary cortisol at 0, 30, 60, and 90 minutes post-250 μg intravenous ACTH in 39 subjects with decompensated cirrhosis, finding similar mean concentrations and increments from baseline with healthy volunteers (20). Mean salivary cortisol values at baseline (19.9 nmol/L) and at 30 minutes (40 nmol/L) in patients

Table 3. Geometric mean of post-ACTH serum cortisol concentrations in male volunteers, female volunteers, low protein patients, and OCP-females

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serum cortisol (nmol/L)</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Low protein patients</th>
<th>OCP-females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GC-MS</td>
<td>274 (131-575)</td>
<td>254 (139-463)</td>
<td>305 (173-537)</td>
<td>537 (315-914)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immunoassay</td>
<td>289 (151-556)</td>
<td>247 (134-455)</td>
<td>282 (167-476)</td>
<td>465 (301-718)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-ACTH</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GC-MS</td>
<td>563 (418-757)</td>
<td>555 (421-731)</td>
<td>552 (393-776)</td>
<td>869 (649-1162)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immunoassay</td>
<td>577 (430-773)</td>
<td>542 (416-707)*</td>
<td>514 (384-688)*</td>
<td>747 (577-967)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: GC-MS, gas chromatography–mass spectrometry; OCP-female, females taking the oral contraceptive pill. Results are expressed as geometric mean (2.5th–97.5th percentile).

*Indicates a significant difference (P-value < .05) when compared to concentrations in females at the same time point.

**Indicates a significant difference (P-value < .05) when compared to concentrations in males at the same time point.

***Indicates a significant difference (P-value < .05) when compared to concentrations in males at the same time point.
with cirrhosis were higher than in our study (5.3 and 19 nmol/L, respectively), likely due to measurement by immunoassay rather than mass spectrometry. Their patient group had similar modest reductions in albumin concentration to ours (mean 30 g/L), but CBG levels were not measured. In this context, it is noteworthy that CBG levels were also only modestly reduced in our low-protein population, suggesting that more profound reductions may be needed before differences in serum cortisol concentrations become clinically apparent. Indeed, Fede et al demonstrated that CBG levels correlated with Child-Pugh cirrhosis severity score and accounted for the overestimation of adrenal insufficiency based on measurement of total (serum) cortisol (21). Thevenot et al similarly found a correlation between low CBG and low serum cortisol in their study of 95 patients with nonseptic cirrhosis, with baseline serum cortisol concentrations being significantly lower in patients with CBG concentrations of <35 mg/L compared to those with normal CBG values (22). Similarly, subnormal serum cortisol responses to high-dose ACTH stimulation were associated with low CBG levels (22). Salivary cortisol concentrations, as anticipated, were unaffected by CBG status. Perogamvros et al also found a similar discordance in salivary and serum cortisol responses in 2 patients with CBG deficiency (12), although salivary measurement is likely to find much wider clinical application in common disorders of altered CBG production such as cirrhosis, nephrotic syndrome, sepsis, and critical illness than this rare genetic disorder.

Estrogen exerts a profound stimulatory effect on CBG production (27, 28). Early-morning serum cortisol values in women using ethinyl estradiol contraception (reference interval: 284-994 nmol/L) are thus significantly greater than in nonusers (159-569 nmol/L) (27). Similarly, we found a marked elevation in mean serum cortisol among estrogen users in our study, likely as a result of the anticipated increase in CBG concentrations. In contrast, as others have also demonstrated (29, 30), stimulated salivary cortisol values were not different in oral contraceptive pill users and nonusers. These observations have potentially significant clinical value since patients are currently advised to discontinue estrogen therapy for up to 6 weeks in order to obtain a reliable assessment of serum cortisol responses to dynamic testing. We did find a significant elevation in basal salivary cortisol values in women taking estrogen, although this contrasts with previous studies (27, 28) and is unlikely to be of clinical significance.

To our knowledge, very few previous studies have tested the performance of salivary cortisol responses to ACTH stimulation in a cohort of patients undergoing evaluation for potential adrenal insufficiency in a routine clinical setting. Applying the 2.5th percentile for salivary cortisol responses to establish a cut-off, we compared the diagnostic utility of salivary and serum responses using immunoassay serum cortisol “cut-offs” that we had established previously (3). We found excellent diagnostic performance of salivary cortisol, especially in patients with high or low pretest probability of adrenal insufficiency. Even in the intermediate probability group, discordance in serum and salivary measures was largely due to minor differences around the respective lower

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**Figure 2.** Correlation between salivary and serum cortisol measured by GC-MS and immunoassay at baseline and post-ACTH stimulation. Plots (A) and (C) show correlation between salivary and serum cortisol measured by GC-MS at baseline and post-ACTH stimulation, respectively; plots (B) and (D) show correlation between salivary and serum cortisol measured by the Abbott Architect immunoassay at baseline and post-ACTH stimulation, respectively. Dotted black line indicates perfect correlation between salivary and serum cortisol; solid black line indicates actual correlation. Abbreviations: GC-MS, gas chromatography–mass spectrometry.
Table 4. Patients with suspected hypoadrenalism—characteristics, clinical presentation, pretest likelihood of disease, and ACTH test outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Clinical details</th>
<th>Pretest likelihood</th>
<th>Post-Synacthen [serum] (nmol/L)</th>
<th>Serum outcome</th>
<th>Post-Synacthen [saliva] (nmol/L)</th>
<th>Saliva outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Addison’s disease; hypothyroidism Medication—hydrocortisone, fludrocortisone, thyroxine</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>&lt;28</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Addison’s disease Medication—hydrocortisone, fludrocortisone</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>&lt;28</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Asthma; recurrent oral glucocorticoids; fatigue Medication—Seretide inhaler</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Previous transsphenoidal resection of invasive pituitary adenoma Medication—hydrocortisone, thyroxine, testosterone</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Left adrenalectomy for autonomous cortisol secretion; ulcerative colitis; recent high-dose glucocorticoids Medication—hydrocortisone</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Addison’s disease; treated Graves’ disease Medication—hydrocortisone, fludrocortisone</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>&lt;28</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>Previously diagnosed adrenal suppression secondary to recurrent glucocorticoids Medication—prednisolone</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Previous transsphenoidal resection of nonfunctioning pituitary adenoma; transient diabetes insipidus; primary hypothyroidism</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Type 1 diabetes mellitus; recurrent hypoglycemia Medication—hydrocortisone</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Iatrogenic hypoadrenalism (prolonged glucocorticoid treatment for sarcoidosis) Medication—hydrocortisone</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Previous resection of craniopharyngioma with partial hypopituitarism post-op; Medication—thyroxine, testosterone, growth hormone, desmopressin</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Type 1 diabetes mellitus; recurrent hypoglycemia; weight loss</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Previous surgical resection of nonfunctioning pituitary adenoma; isolated hypogonadotrophic hypogonadism</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Autoimmune hypothyroidism; vitamin B12 deficiency; fatigue</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Previous transsphenoidal resection of nonfunctioning pituitary adenoma; growth hormone deficiency Medication—growth hormone</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Pituitary macroadenoma—no pre-existing hormone deficit</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>Previous resection of nonfunctioning pituitary macroadenoma—no pre-existing hormone deficit</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Nonfunctioning pituitary adenoma—no pre-existing hormone deficit</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Nonfunctioning pituitary adenoma—no pre-existing hormone deficit</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Fatigue; low energy</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>490</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Isolated hypogonadotrophic hypogonadism; normal pituitary MRI</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>502</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Dizziness; postural hypotension</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>Pass</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Our study has several strengths and weaknesses. Strengths include the large number of subjects recruited, measurement of salivary cortisol by LC-MS/MS, measurement of serum cortisol concentration by GC-MS as well as immunoassay, evaluation of CBG concentration, and an assessment of the performance of the lower reference limit for 30-minute salivary cortisol concentration as a diagnostic cut-off in a clinical population. Our study also has several limitations. First, we confined post-stimulation measurement to a 30-minute value only. Others have shown that cortisol responses, including those in saliva, rise further at 60 minutes and might potentially lead to misclassification of some patients with adrenal insufficiency if the 30-minute values alone are relied upon (15, 31). Elder et al demonstrated an ongoing rise in serum and salivary cortisol concentration at least up to 120 minutes after 250 micrograms ACTH. The time taken for cortisol to reach peak concentration was the same in both, consistent with very rapid transfer of free cortisol from serum to saliva (15). However, adopting method-dependent lower reference limits improves the specifici...
associated with reduced CBG production and in women taking estrogen therapy, in whom an inconvenient period of estrogen withdrawal may be avoided.

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Disclosures
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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