

Hypothyroidism

What happens when this important gland takes a nap?

Your Thyroid gland is a butterfly shaped structure that sits at the base of your throat. Hormones released from it affect all-important part of your body such as your brain, heart, muscles and skin.

The thyroid controls your metabolism; how your cells use the energy they get from the food you eat. When it begins to under perform or release less than the needed amount of thyroid hormone your metabolism slows. This leads to all sorts of symptoms.

You may feel sluggish, very cold, appear pale and puffy and be constipated. You could be gaining weight, have very dry skin and hair loss. You may even fall into a depression.

What causes Hypothyroidism?

Women, especially older women, are more likely to develop thyroid disorders than men. If you have a close family member with an autoimmune disease or if you suffer from any of these autoimmune diseases yourself you could be more likely to develop hypothyroidism.

- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Celiac Disease
- Type 1 Diabetes
- Addison's Disease
- Multiple Sclerosis
- Pernicious Anemia
- Vitiligo

An autoimmune disorder called Hashimoto's Disease can destroy the thyroid and its ability to produce thyroid hormone. As in all autoimmune diseases, the body mistakenly turns its defenses on healthy cells it sees as invaders.

Certain medications used to treat heart disease, psychiatric disorders, like lithium used for Bi-polar disease, and cancer drugs such as interferon alpha and interleukin-2 can affect the thyroid's ability to function properly.

Radiation therapy to the head or neck can damage the thyroid. Problems with other glands like the pituitary and the hypothalamus in the brain can cause problems with the thyroid as well. This is called "secondary hypothyroidism".

There can be a temporary form of hypothyroidism after pregnancy and unlike a permanently damaged thyroid or a thyroid laboring under the effects of other necessary medications, post-pregnancy hypothyroidism usually resolves itself as critical hormone levels throughout the body normalize.

A deficiency in the vital minerals iodine and selenium adversely affect the functioning of the thyroid. The body needs iodine in perfect amounts to make thyroid hormone. Either too much or too little damages the thyroid's ability to make it. High amounts increase the risk of Hashimoto's, the autoimmune disease mentioned earlier.

Selenium is required to activate the thyroid hormone. As the cells of the thyroid generate hydrogen peroxide, necessary to make thyroid hormone, selenium protects the gland itself from the oxidative stress of this process. Without enough selenium, high iodine levels lead to destruction of the thyroid gland cells.

How is it diagnosed?

Your doctor performs blood work to measure 2 components, TSH (Thyroid-Stimulating Hormone) and T4, a measurement of your thyroxine level. T4 is made in the thyroid itself and low T4 usually means you have hypothyroidism. Your tests could show higher than normal levels of TSH, a regulating hormone made in your pituitary gland at the base of the brain that acts on the thyroid telling it how much T4 to produce. This is called “subclinical” or mild hypothyroidism and is an early stage of full blown hypothyroidism. Once a diagnosis is made your doctor may suggest synthetic hormone replacement. Below is an additional list of complimentary management tools you may want to discuss with your doctor as well.

Dietary Support

Sea vegetables are a natural source of iodine to support the thyroid. Aim for twice a week and it can be as easy as adding a piece of kombu to a pot of beans or soup. Sprinkle kelp granules over cold or hot dishes just as you would use salt. Make a wrap using nori, the traditional wrap of sushi dishes.

Cook cruciferous vegetables rather than eating them raw. These veggies, while great for your health overall, should be eaten cooked to counteract a compound called “goitrogens”. These vegetables include kale, broccoli, cauliflower and cabbage.

Include selenium rich foods in your diet. Brazil nuts are an exceptionally rich source of selenium and it takes only 2 per day to improve your levels. Other sources of selenium rich foods include: mushrooms (cremini and shiitake), codfish, halibut, tuna and salmon. For those without a shellfish allergy, shrimp and scallops are delicious and can easily be prepared in a variety of delicious

dishes. For you meat eaters out there chicken (and chicken eggs), lamb and turkey are also rich in selenium and can be included in dishes of all kinds – Italian, Mexican, Asian and Middle Eastern cultures have many, many delicious dishes that can be made with chicken, lamb and turkey.

Supplements

Explore supplements for hypothyroidism very carefully and with the knowledge and consent of your physician. The thyroid is a delicate gland that depends on the perfect balance of the minerals iodine and selenium to produce thyroid hormone. Some people choose to supplement with thyroid glandular extract, commonly obtained from cows, but sometimes pigs or sheep. Choose only compounds made from cows certified free of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy. This is obviously not suitable for vegans/vegetarians, those pregnant or breastfeeding and anyone with a diminished immune system such as in HIV/AIDS.

Lifestyle

- Gentle exercise – If you are suffering from the joint pain that sometimes accompanies hypothyroidism, choosing a slow, meditative form of exercise such as Qigong or Tai Chi will keep you in shape without stressing your body.
- Meditation – practicing either formal or informal meditation will help manage your stress effectively. Meditation is the gift you give yourself for a lifetime as it will not only help you heal from hypothyroidism, it can help keep you emotionally balanced and keep you from suffering other stress related illnesses.
- Get enough sleep – hypothyroidism can disrupt the restorative sleep phase and 30% of those with the condition can suffer from other sleep disturbances such as sleep

apnea. Use good sleep hygiene by keeping your bedroom cool; follow a soothing bedtime ritual such as a warm bath or beverage. Get to bed by 10PM and make sure to stop “blue light” activities such as computers, cell phones and TV one hour prior to sleep. Reading, writing, meditation or handcrafts such as knitting are soothing activities that bridge your hectic daytime to your restful sleep time.

Combine good medical care with good self care and you can counteract the symptoms of an under active thyroid and lead a healthy, active life!