



## THINKING ABOUT YOUR THYROID

### *Get to Know This Small but Mighty Gland*

You've probably heard of the thyroid gland, but do you know what it does? You might not give it a second thought unless something goes wrong. Thyroid trouble can cause a range of seemingly unrelated problems, including drastic changes to your weight, energy, digestion, or mood. Learn to recognize signs of thyroid disorder, so you can get treatment if needed.

The thyroid is a small but powerful butterfly-shaped gland located at the front of your neck. It controls many of your body's most important functions. The thyroid gland makes hormones that affect your breathing, heart rate, digestion, and body temperature. These systems speed up as thyroid hormone

levels rise. But problems occur if the thyroid makes too much hormone or not enough.

Nearly 1 in 20 Americans ages 12 and older has an under-active thyroid, or hypothyroidism. When thyroid glands don't produce enough hormones, many body functions slow down. A smaller number of people—about 1 in 100—has an over-active thyroid, called hyperthyroidism. Their thyroids release too much hormone.

Thyroid problems are most likely to occur in women or in people over age 60. Having a family history of thyroid disorders also increases the risk.

#### **COMMON CAUSES**

Thyroid problems are often caused by autoimmune disorders, in which the immune system mistakenly attacks and destroys the body's own cells. For example, an autoimmune disorder called Graves' disease can cause the thyroid to be over-active, while one called Hashimoto's disease can make the thyroid under-active.

Thyroid disorders can be hard to diagnose, because the symptoms are similar to other conditions. "Hypothyroidism can be very subtle," says NIH's Dr. Monica Skarulis, an expert on the thyroid. If a thyroid disorder is suspected—maybe because of

a weight change or fatigue—blood tests can help to confirm the diagnosis and find its cause.

Patients with under-active thyroids can be treated with artificial thyroid hormones. Over-active thyroids are often treated with medications that reduce hormone levels.

During pregnancy, thyroid hormones can affect the health of both the mother and the developing baby. Thyroid hormone levels sometimes need to be carefully monitored and adjusted, even if the expectant mother never had thyroid problems before. After

pregnancy, some women have abnormal levels of thyroid hormone for a year or more.

The thyroid gland also can be affected by cancer. Thyroid cancer usually has no symptoms. It's sometimes first noticed as a lump in the neck—although such bumps are more likely to be harmless nodules.

“Thyroid nodules are extremely common, whereas thyroid cancer is pretty rare,” Skarulis says. A doctor can determine if a nodule is cancerous by removing and examining a tiny piece of it. If it shows signs of cancer, the

nodule or even the entire thyroid will be removed.

If you notice signs of thyroid disease, talk with a health professional. Based on your family history, symptoms, and medical exam, your provider can help you decide if further testing or treatment is needed.

## SYMPTOMS OF THYROID DISORDER



### HYPOTHYROIDISM:

- Fatigue
- Depression
- Joint and muscle pain
- Cold intolerance
- Slowed heart rate
- Constipation
- Weight gain



### HYPERTHYROIDISM:

- Fatigue
- Nervousness or irritability
- Trouble sleeping
- Muscle weakness
- Heat intolerance or increased sweating
- Rapid and irregular heartbeat
- Frequent bowel movements or diarrhea
- Weight loss