

How's Your Thyroid?

by Dr. Sara Ohgushi, Naturopathic Physician

Q: What does the thyroid do? How do I know if my thyroid is OK?

A: Low energy, easy weight gain, constipation, dry skin, hair loss, heavy or irregular menstrual bleeding, infertility, depression, sensitivity to cold... these are common symptoms of low thyroid hormone, called “hypothyroidism”, which is extremely common and often goes undiagnosed. One estimate is that 20% of women and 5% of men have hypothyroidism. Another estimate is that in the United States 27 million people are affected by thyroid disease (1 in 10 Americans; half are undiagnosed).

You may only have a few of the above symptoms, and all of those symptoms can result from other causes, but a simple blood test can tell you whether or not you need more thyroid hormone. If you do, you will be amazed at how much better you will feel, almost immediately, when you begin taking thyroid medication. Thyroid is the hormone that regulates metabolism- i.e., how fast should the engine run? This effects almost every bodily function.

The most common screening blood test is TSH, or thyroid stimulating hormone. This is the hormone coming from your brain (pituitary gland) that tells the thyroid gland (located in front of your Adam's apple in your neck) to get to work. Thus, when TSH is high, your thyroid is not doing its job and your thyroid hormones are low (and you need more). While the old “normal range” for TSH is up to 5.5 mIU/L, the Endocrine Society and the American Society of Clinical Endocrinologists has recommended a change in the normal range to a maximum value of 3.0 mIU/L. What this means is that you should ask your doctor what the actual value of your TSH is: it should ideally be below 2. If it is 3 or 4 or more, even though the lab may say that is in the “normal” range, you should request a trial of low dose thyroid medication and retest in 3 months. There are also different kinds of thyroid medication to try if the usual “Synthroid” does not resolve your hypothyroid symptoms.

Exercise promotes healthy thyroid function, so whether you take medication or not here is yet another reason to get out there and move your body! Simple walking 3-5 times/week is an excellent basic exercise program.

A variety of factors can affect thyroid function. Stress suppresses the thyroid. Various other hormonal changes can affect the thyroid. For

example, after pregnancy/childbirth your thyroid may have changed. Developing low thyroid is also common during the perimenopausal period.

Iodine deficiency can cause hypothyroidism, but this is extremely rare in modern industrialized countries since the addition of iodine to table salt. Iodine is found naturally in seaweeds. Some foods, if eaten excessively, may block iodine utilization and thus cause thyroid problems. These foods include turnips, cabbage, soy, and peanuts. Cooking these foods generally minimizes this problem.

Much rarer than low thyroid is hyperthyroidism, or overactive thyroid gland. The symptoms include fast pulse, weight loss despite large appetite, feeling overheated easily, insomnia and nervousness. People who are hyperthyroid may become hypothyroid over time.

Just as most adults should be screened for diabetes and high cholesterol, most should be screened for thyroid dysfunction. This is an easy one, so don't delay!

Note: This article is not meant to substitute for direct medical advice. For more details, references to this article or questions, email Dr. Ohgushi at sao@imagina.com, or call her at 503-703-7825 to schedule a free 20 minute consultation. Dr. Ohgushi is licensed in Natural Childbirth and provides full prenatal, birth and postpartum services. As a Naturopathic Physician she also maintains a general family practice including pediatric care. OFFICE: 2304 E. Burnside, Suite 101, by appointment only.

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