

Health topics

Hypothyroidism



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What is Hypothyroidism?

The thyroid gland is located in the front of the neck just below the voice box (larynx). It releases hormones that control metabolism.

Hypothyroidism is a condition in which the thyroid gland does not make enough thyroid hormone.

What causes it?

The most common cause of hypothyroidism is inflammation of the thyroid gland, which damages the gland's cells. Hashimoto's thyroiditis, in which the immune system attacks the thyroid gland, is the most common example of this. Some women develop hypothyroidism after pregnancy (often referred to as "postpartum thyroiditis").

Other common causes of hypothyroidism include:

- ❖ Congenital (birth) defects
- ❖ Radiation treatments to the neck to treat different cancers, which may also damage the thyroid gland
- ❖ Radioactive iodine used to treat an overactive thyroid (hyperthyroidism)
- ❖ Surgical removal of part or all of the thyroid gland, done to treat other thyroid problems
- ❖ Viral thyroiditis, which may cause hyperthyroidism and is often followed by temporary or permanent hypothyroidism

Certain drugs can also cause hypothyroidism, including lithium and drugs used to treat hyperthyroidism.

What are the symptoms?

Females over 50 are at risk.

Early symptoms:

- ❖ Being more sensitive to cold
- ❖ Constipation
- ❖ Depression
- ❖ Fatigue or feeling slowed down
- ❖ Heavier menstrual periods
- ❖ Joint or muscle pain
- ❖ Paleness or dry skin
- ❖ Thin, brittle hair or fingernails
- ❖ Weakness
- ❖ Weight gain (unintentional)

Late symptoms, if left untreated:

- ❖ Decreased taste and smell
- ❖ Hoarseness
- ❖ Thickening of the skin
- ❖ Thinning of eyebrows
- ❖ Puffy face, hands, and feet
- ❖ Slow speech

How is it diagnosed?

A physical examination may reveal a smaller than normal thyroid gland, although sometimes the gland is normal size or even enlarged (goitre).

The examination may also reveal:

- ❖ Brittle nails
- ❖ Coarse facial features
- ❖ Pale or dry skin, which may be cool to the touch
- ❖ Swelling of the arms and legs
- ❖ Thin and brittle hair

Laboratory tests to determine thyroid function include:

- ❖ TSH test
- ❖ T4 test

How can hypothyroidism affect my health?

In most cases, thyroid levels return to normal with proper treatment. However, thyroid hormone replacement must be taken for the rest of your life.

Myxedema coma, the most severe form of hypothyroidism, is rare. It may be caused by an infection, illness, exposure to cold, or certain medications in people with untreated hypothyroidism.

Other complications are:

- ❖ Heart disease
- ❖ Increased risk of infection
- ❖ Infertility
- ❖ Miscarriage

People with untreated hypothyroidism are at increased risk for:

- ❖ Giving birth to a baby with birth defects
- ❖ Heart disease because of higher levels of LDL ("bad") cholesterol
- ❖ Heart failure

Treatment

The purpose of treatment is to replace the thyroid hormone that is lacking.

Medicines:

- ❖ Levothyroxine is the most commonly used medication. Doctors will prescribe the lowest dose possible that effectively relieves symptoms and brings your TSH level to a normal range. If you have heart disease or you are older, your doctor may start with a very small dose

Lifelong therapy is required unless you have a condition called transient viral thyroiditis.

You must continue taking your medication even when your symptoms go away. When starting your medication, your doctor may check your hormone levels every 2 - 3 months. After that, your thyroid hormone levels should be monitored at least every year.

Your role in managing your condition

Important things to remember when you are taking thyroid hormone are:

- ❖ Do NOT stop taking the medication when you feel better. Continue taking the medication exactly as directed by your doctor
- ❖ If you change brands of thyroid medicine, let your doctor know. Your levels may need to be checked
- ❖ Some dietary changes can change the way your body absorbs the thyroid medicine. Talk with your doctor if you are eating a lot of soy products or are on a high-fibre diet
- ❖ Thyroid medicine works best on an empty stomach and when taken 1 hour before any other medications

Do NOT take thyroid hormone with fibre supplements, calcium, iron, multivitamins, aluminum hydroxide antacids, colestipol, or medicines that bind bile acids.

After you start taking replacement therapy, tell your doctor if you have any symptoms of increased thyroid activity (hyperthyroidism) such as:

- ❖ Palpitations
- ❖ Rapid weight loss
- ❖ Restlessness or shakiness
- ❖ Sweating

Myxedema coma is a medical emergency that occurs when the body's level of thyroid hormones becomes extremely low. It is treated with intravenous thyroid hormone replacement and steroid medications. Some patients may need supportive therapy (oxygen, breathing assistance, fluid replacement) and intensive-care nursing.

DISCLAIMER

The reader should always consult a doctor if they believe they may be suffering from this medical condition. The information contained herein is intended to assist understanding and should not take the place of your doctor's advice or instructions. Whilst every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information contained herein, Universal Care does not accept responsibility for any errors or omissions or their consequences, and shall not be liable for any damages suffered arising out of the use of this information.