

PROBLEMS WITH THE THYROID GLAND

Thyroid problems are common, but are often missed because the symptoms may be mild and build up slowly. Some of the symptoms are that people feel tired or tense and their hair and nails change.

What does thyroid gland do?

The thyroid gland is at the base of the throat around the trachea (windpipe). It makes hormones that go to all cells in the body, and it is in charge of how quickly the food is changed into power the body can use, heart rate, muscle strength, growth, body heat and mood. The hormones made by the thyroid gland, Thyroxin (T4) and Triiodothyronine (T3), are controlled by the hormone Thyroid Stimulating Hormone (TSH).



If the thyroid is not working well, it can cause a wide range of symptoms. The most common thyroid problems are hypothyroidism, working too slowly, and hyperthyroidism, working too quickly.

What is a Hypothyroidism?

Hypothyroidism is the more common of the two problems in women and is often caused by Hashimoto's thyroiditis. This is when the body's immune system makes a mistake and attacks the thyroid gland. The symptoms of hypothyroidism are subtle and can often be explained by other causes such as getting older or stress; as a result the problem may be missed. Hypothyroidism can also happen after giving birth, and women suffering from great sadness after having a baby should have their thyroid checked. Hypothyroidism has been linked to heart problems (high cholesterol), bone problems, high blood pressure and sore joints.

What is a Hyperthyroidism?

Hyperthyroidism is found more in younger women and is caused by Grave's disease. It happens when the body's immune system makes the thyroid work too hard. But, it can also be caused by a lump growing on the thyroid gland that makes too much hormone. Some people with Grave's disease get bulging eyes and a lot of tears and their eyes are hurt by daylight. Others may have a goitre, which is an obvious swelling in the front of the neck.

Hyperthyroidism is very serious because it speeds up how quickly the food is changed into power at times by as much as 80 percent. If not treated, hyperthyroidism can lead to changes in heartbeat and bone problems.

What are the common symptoms of thyroid problems?

SYMPTOMS OF HYPOTHYROIDISM	SYMPTOMS OF HYPERTHYROIDISM
<p><i>Fatigue</i> <i>Do not feel as hungry as usual</i> <i>Weight gain (and being over weight)</i> <i>Painful PMS</i> <i>Muscle weakness</i> <i>Dry and scaly skin</i> <i>Feel cold more often</i> <i>Puffy face and eyes</i></p>	<p><i>Feel too hot</i> <i>Weight loss</i> <i>Very tired</i> <i>Very nervous</i> <i>Hard to sleep</i> <i>Muscle weakness</i> <i>Shaking</i> <i>Diarrhoea</i></p>

*Dry, brittle hair and hair loss
Feel very sad
Muscle cramps
Hard to go to the toilet
Menstrual changes
Brittle nails*

*Heart beating too fast
Fine, silky hair or hair loss
Nails become soft*

What are the tests to find out if I have a thyroid problem?

You must tell your doctor if you have any of the symptoms. An exam each year by your doctor helps in the early finding of thyroid problems. The most common test to check the thyroid function is to measure the Thyroid Stimulating Hormone (TSH). This is done by a blood test. If the doctor thinks there is a lump on the thyroid, a radioactive iodine uptake test may be ordered. In this test, a very small amount of radioactive iodine is swallowed, and the following day a reading is taken of the amount of iodine that has been absorbed. Ultrasound tests may also be used to detect problems.

What are the treatments for thyroid problems?

Most thyroid problems can be treated. The treatment for hypothyroidism is to take pills order by your doctor once a day. TSH levels are checked once a year to see if the dose is still the best for you.

One treatment for hyperthyroidism is a dose of radioactive iodine (a much larger dose than is used for the radioactive iodine uptake test). This shrinks the thyroid gland and reduces the Thyroxin (T4). After the iodine treatment, the thyroid gland may become under-active, and the person may need to take the pills for hypothyroid.

Where can I learn more?

- To learn more about thyroid problems, contact your doctor or speak to a nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling: Alberta Health Link toll free at 1-866-408-LINK (5465). Mandarin Health Link Calgary at 403-943-1554, Cantonese Health Link Calgary at 403-943-1556
- If you want a free consultation from the Women’s Health Resources, you can contact Irene M. Jackson in Calgary at 403-944-2262 or email irene.jackson@albertahealthservices.ca
- *The Thyroid Sourcebook for Women* by M. Sara Rosenthal, PhD. This book is at the Women’s Health Resources; call Calgary at 403-944-2267 for more information.

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