

Thyroid Disease: The Hidden Epidemic

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Thyroid medications are in the top-ten most-prescribed drugs in the country. As much, if not more than diabetes medications. To make matters worse, for each person receiving thyroid medications, there are more who have "sub-clinical" thyroid disease, where the symptoms aren't yet bad enough to trigger evaluation or treatment.

In general, we can have too little thyroid hormone, called hypo-thyroidism, or too much thyroid hormone, called hyper-thyroidism. The vast majority of thyroid disease is of the "hypo-" type--similar to too little insulin in diabetes and too little sex hormone in infertility, menopause and andropause. (See previous articles on these hormones).

It is clear that all of our glands are under attack. They are some of the most vulnerable tissues in our body. And since most hormones affect every cell of our body, when a gland is not working well, it has a great influence on our health. In most cases, the cause of glandular illness is a combination of factors, including heredity, environment and stress (see below). In many, there is an auto-immune component, where the immune system attacks the gland or hormone receptors (see below).

Symptoms of Thyroid Disease

The thyroid gland is a butterfly-shaped gland in the front of the neck. It influences many systems of our body, especially the speed of our metabolism--the more the hormone, the faster our metabolism goes.

Hypo-thyroidism symptoms, even when sub-clinical include: fatigue, cold extremities, low body temperature, poor skin healing, dry skin, coarse hair, loss of the outer third of the eyebrows, constipation, poor immune function, depression, increased blood cholesterol, blood pressure problems, fibro-cystic breasts, long menstrual periods, infertility, mild diabetes, muscle pains and in pregnancy and childhood, mental retardation and developmental delay. Doesn't this sound like so many of us?

Hyper-thyroidism, which is less common, can manifest as anxiety, sleep disturbance, heart palpitations, thin, oily skin and hair, frontal hair loss, bulging eyes (called Graves disease) and other biochemical abnormalities such as osteoporosis.

Both forms can occur at any age, but hypothyroidism is more common as we get older. Many women develop thyroid disease in association with pregnancy or menopause.

There is a complex relationship between the thyroid, sex, adrenal and sugar-controlling hormones; if one goes off, the others often follow.

Evaluation of the Thyroid

As most of us have some of the above symptoms, at some point your doctor will evaluate your thyroid. However, the type of evaluation can vary from very simple blood tests, to more complex procedures that are only done in special cases.

Most conventional doctors will begin with a TSH, or Thyroid Stimulating Hormone. This is a hormone made by the pituitary gland (in the brain) which tells the thyroid how much hormone to make. High TSH means the pituitary thinks there is not enough thyroid hormone, which is the situation with hypo-thyroidism. Low TSH implies hyper-thyroidism.

The other common test is the actual amounts of thyroid hormone in the blood. The most common, T4, can be measured several ways. Since much thyroid hormone is bound to protein in the blood, and is not active when bound, the "free" T4 is measured. In the body, T4 is converted to T3, which is approximately ten times more active than T4. It is important to measure free T3 as well as free T4.

So, if these tests are normal, then it is assumed that the thyroid system is working adequately.

Antibodies to the Thyroid Gland and Components

However, while these labs remain "normal", the body can be making anti-bodies to the thyroid gland or its components. Depending upon where these antibodies attack, eventually hypo- or hyper- thyroidism will develop. Since conventional medicine can only treat autoimmune disease powerful drugs or surgery, antibodies are only dealt with when the labs are "abnormal" or there are other red flags. It's a wait-and-see, while these antibodies are doing their damage. It's like having foreign invaders in our country and only having nuclear bombs. We lose if we don't do anything, and we lose if we do something.

Why the Thyroid Gland: Holistic Theory

There are many theories about why the thyroid gland is so sick, but no one theory seems to explain it all. The combination of factors include:

1. Autoimmune disease. Holistic medicine proposes that in autoimmune disease the immune system gets confused and begins attacking the body itself. Causes of autoimmune disease include chronic stress, adrenal fatigue, nutritional deficiency and allergy due to soil depletion, lack of stomach acid and digestive enzymes, improper bacteria and yeast in the intestines (dysbiosis), leaky gut (where toxins from these bacteria and yeast get into the bloodstream), energetic imbalance (see below), and most importantly environmental toxins (see below).

2. Iodine competition. Modern society has cycled in its approach to iodine. At some points, iodine was added to our foods, such as salt. At other points, it was removed from our foods, such as replacing potassium iodide in bread with potassium bromide. Currently, our environment is filled with "halides" that can compete with iodine absorption and processing. These include: fluoride in water and toothpaste, chlorine in water and other disinfectants, bromine in foods and in plants, and perchlorates, industrial toxins that have been found in breast milk.

3. Toxins. Certain foods, such as soy, gluten, dairy and sugar, can act as toxins by blocking nutrient

absorption or causing immune system confusion. Known toxins in our air, food and water include: heavy metals (i.e. lead and mercury), pesticides, plastic residues, and thousand of others. One can be toxic from within, such as the case of chronic constipation or chronic yeast infections, which overwhelm the liver and other detoxification methods of the body.

4. **Nutritional deficiency.** Many conventional foods are nutritionally deficient. Besides iodine, the thyroid gland needs the full spectrum of vitamins, minerals, amino acids and other factors to properly function. Many women are nutritionally deficient before, during, or after pregnancy, which is a hidden cause of thyroid and other dysfunctions at this time of life.

5. **Stress.** Our lifestyles do not allow for adequate rest and recovery. Since the thyroid gland is the gland that controls whether we're going fast or slow, it may simply "burn out", through the above mechanisms or others, just like the pancreas burns out in diabetes. The adrenal hormones, the shock-absorbers of our body, intimately interact with thyroid hormones. Adrenal fatigue is extremely common beginning in high school.

6. **Energy.** The thyroid gland is located near our "throat chakra". In yoga theory, each chakra is involved with a certain emotional and spiritual aspect of our multi-dimensional nature. The throat chakra has to do with our feelings of expression, both in an emotional sense, and in the sense of being heard, being creative, and having meaning.

7. **Genetics.** There is certainly a genetic tendency toward thyroid and auto-immune disease. However, as discussed in prior articles, these genes are like switches that can be turned on or off by factors under our control. Most authors agree (and is evidenced by studies of identical twins raised in different environments) that only 20% of our illness is determined by genes, the other 80% by lifestyle.

Holistic Evaluation and Treatment

Thyroid disease lends well to the multi-dimensional holistic approach. Many people have been able to reduce or eliminate thyroid medication, and reverse auto-immune attack of the thyroid gland.

The holistic evaluation and treatment of thyroid disease is more involved than that of conventional medicine. It is not one blood test or one pill. You may need to change aspects of your lifestyle, such as how you eat or sleep. Not all tests and treatments are "covered" by insurance, so there is some cost involved in properly evaluating and healing the thyroid.

Some tests include: nutrient levels, heavy metal testing (see separate article), TRH, TRH stimulation test, TSH antibodies, iodine loading, and thyroid scan.

Nutritional supplements are usually required to help the body's metabolic processes and to get rid of toxins. Changes in diet are often recommended. Often, a formal detoxification process is required. Modalities such as yoga and acupuncture can be very helpful.

If a person is already on thyroid hormone, but remains

symptomatic (still not feeling well, as manifested by fatigue, mild depression, constipation, etc), then a holistic doctor may change the formulation of the thyroid hormones, or add supplements that support related glands such as the adrenals.

Thyroid health has been correlated with healthy longevity. Since the thyroid affects so many tissues and functions of the body, thyroid health can ultimately save huge amounts of time, energy, money and quality of life.

IMPORTANT NOTE: This general information should not be used to make decisions about medical care without the involvement of an experienced practitioner.

For More Information

- See Dr. Cheikin's website, www.cheikin.com for related articles on: Adrenal Fatigue, Detoxification and others
- Dr. Cheikin offers workshops in several holistic health topics. Please call for more information or to host a Workshop.
- An expanded bibliography is available upon request.
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