

Thyroid Disease: The Hidden Epidemic



Michael Cheikin MD
Holistic Medicine and Physiatry

www.cheikin.com 610-239-9901

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.

Thyroid medications are some of the most-prescribed drugs in the country, as much, if not more than diabetes medications. There are many more that have "sub-clinical" thyroid disease, where the symptoms, such as depression or high cholesterol are treated by other medications. Since hormones affect almost every cell of our body, when a gland is not working well, it has a great influence on our health

In general, we can have too little thyroid hormone, called hypo-thyroidism, or too much, 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. It is clear that all of our glands are under attack. They are some of the most vulnerable tissues in our body. In most cases, the cause of glandular illness is a combination of factors, including environmental toxins, nutritional deficiencies, other stressors, and heredity. In many, there is an auto-immune component, where the immune system attacks the gland, called "Hashimoto's thyroiditis".

Symptoms of Thyroid Disease

Hypothyroid symptoms 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 and joint pains and in pregnancy and childhood, mental retardation and developmental delay.

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.

This article will focus on hypothyroidism, which can occur at any age, but is more common as we get older, and for women. Many women develop thyroid disease in association with pregnancy or menopause.

There is a complex relationship between the thyroid, sex, adrenal, sugar and hunger-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 in 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 less active when bound to protein in the blood, the "free" T4 is measured.

If these two tests are normal, then it is conventionally assumed that the thyroid system is properly adjusted.

However, 80% of T4 is converted to T3 by organs such as the liver and muscle. T3 is up to ten times more active than T4. While it is important to

measure T3 at the same time as T4, it is often not tested. Another extremely important thyroid hormone, Reverse T3, is rarely tested.

Antibodies to the Thyroid Gland and Components

Even when the above labs remain "normal", the body can be making antibodies to the thyroid gland or its components. Depending upon what these antibodies attack, eventually hypo- or hyper-thyroidism will develop. Since conventional medicine can only treat autoimmune disease with powerful drugs or surgery, thyroid 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

Symptoms of Thyroid Hypo-Function

Most Obvious

Fatigue
Weight Gain
Depression
Hair Loss
Infertility
Coldness
Constipation
Increased appetite

Less Obvious

Joint and Muscle Stiffness
High Cholesterol
Hypertension
Poor Skin Texture/Healing
Long/Heavy Menstrual Cycles
Sleep Disorder
Shortness of Breath
Weight Loss Resistance
Poor immune function

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, leaky gut syndrome, energetic imbalance and most importantly environmental toxins (see below).

2. Iodine deficiency and competition. In the 1960's iodine was removed from bread, replaced by bromine, and added to salt. 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 thousands of others. Toxins can come 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, oils, amino acids and other factors to properly function. Many women are nutritionally deficient before, during, or after pregnancy, which further stresses the body.

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", like the pancreas burns out in diabetes. The adrenal hormones, the shock-absorbers of our body, intimately interact with thyroid hormones. Adrenal dysfunction often accompanies thyroid dysfunction but is rarely tested conventionally.

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, being heard, having a voice, being creative, and having meaning.

7. Genetics. There is certainly a genetic tendency toward thyroid and auto-immune disease. However, as discussed in other 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

The comprehensive, multi-dimensional holistic approach lends well to approaching thyroid disease. It is not one blood test and one pill.

The evaluation includes lab testing for essential nutrients such as selenium, iodine, zinc, omega-3 oils and tyrosine. Other hormones, such as adrenal, sex

and insulin need to be measured. Hidden infections such as Lyme, Epstein - Barr virus and Candida can contribute to thyroid disease and are sometimes very difficult to detect. Searching for toxins such as lead, mercury, fluoride and bromide are essential. Testing for pesticides and petroleum toxins may also be indicated. Looking for past and present stressors is often fruitful.

Treatment of thyroid begins with education, since interacting with conventional practitioners while on non-conventional protocols is a life-long task.

Changes in lifestyle are often necessary. These include reduction or elimination of grains, dairy, alcohol, nightshades or other foods. The sleep-wake cycle, work and environmental stressors, and relationships often need to be addressed.

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

If a person is already on thyroid medication but remains symptomatic, then oftentimes a change in the formulation of thyroid hormones is necessary.

Not all tests and treatments are "covered" by insurance, so there is some cost involved in properly evaluating and healing the thyroid. However, most patients can achieve substantial improvements that vastly outweigh the above inconveniences.

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 can gain substantial improvement in the quality of life.

***IMPORTANT NOTES:**

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3. Dr. Cheikin's website has related articles such as "Hormonal Web", "Adrenal Fatigue" "Auto-immune Disease", "Leaky Gut" and others.

Michael Cheikin MD is a holistic physician, Board Certified in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation ("Physiatry"), Pain Management, Spinal Cord Medicine and Electrodiagnostic Medicine and licensed in Medical Acupuncture. Dr. Cheikin has extensively studied yoga, diet and metabolism, Ayurvedic, Chinese and energy medicine and other alternative modalities for over 30 years. He specializes in obscure, chronic and severe problems that have not responded satisfactorily to other methods of healing. www.cheikin.com 12/11/2017 b04