

Slow Motor

An underperforming thyroid can leave you feeling tired, cold and depressed.

The thyroid—a butterfly-shaped gland located in front of the larynx—is only two inches long. But don't let size fool you. In its role as master energy controller, the thyroid has profound effects on the entire body.

This small gland can also cause big trouble. The American Thyroid Association (www.thyroid.org) estimates that 20 million Americans, more women than men, have thyroid problems; 12% of the population will develop thyroid problems at some point during their lives. What's more, roughly 60% of those affected are unaware that their thyroids aren't working properly.

Metabolism Malfunction

As part of the hormone-producing endocrine system, the thyroid gland regulates *metabolism*—the production and usage of energy needed to fulfill the body's basic functions. A healthy thyroid produces approximately a teaspoon of hormone per year: 20% in the form of *triiodothyronine* (T3) and the rest as *thyroxine* (T4), with most of the T4 being converted to T3 as needed. These substances are created in response to *thyroid stimulating hormone* (TSH) released by the pituitary gland located under the brain.

Hypothyroidism occurs when the thyroid doesn't make enough hormone to meet the body's needs. To help stimulate hormone production the pituitary gland releases more TSH, which slows down many bodily functions. "The cells don't



take nutrients in as well, and you have trouble excreting waste. You can get constipated, feel cold all the time and have difficulty losing weight," says Connie Sanchez, ND, a naturopathic doctor with Live Well Health Center in Lakewood,

A sluggish thyroid isn't always easy to detect. Blood tests can miss up to 40% of all cases of hypothyroid, a condition that can cause fatigue, depression, weight gain and dry skin and hair.

Colorado. Other symptoms of a slow thyroid include fatigue, joint and muscle pain, slowed heart rate, depression, weight gain, dry skin and hair, brittle nails, irregular periods and decreased sex drive. (*Hyperthyroidism*, excessive hormone release marked by symptoms that

include rapid heartbeat, sweating, heat intolerance, breathlessness and weight loss, is less common.)

Not every individual will show all of hypothyroidism's symptoms, many of which can also occur as the result of other health conditions. The only way to know for sure is through testing.

Testing for TSH levels in the bloodstream gives the most accurate reading of thyroid activity, with an above-normal number representing an underactive thyroid. Then again, TSH levels could appear to be normal and you may be hypothyroid "because you can't adequately convert T4 into T3," says David Brownstein,

MD, medical director of the Center for Holistic Medicine in West Bloomfield, Michigan, and author of *Overcoming Thyroid Disorders* (Medical Alternatives Press). That means your T3 and T4 levels should also be tested.

But even T3 and T4 testing can be

deceptive. “A blood test can miss up to 40% of people with a thyroid problem,” Brownstein explains. “It can’t look inside the cells. For that, take what’s known as your *basal body temperature* (the reading you get before you get out of bed in the morning and start moving around). If it’s below 97.8°F, your cells may not contain enough thyroid hormone, even with a normal blood test. Your doctor should also do a complete history and full physical exam, palpating your thyroid and looking for symptoms.”

You should also find out if you have *Hashimoto’s disease*, in which the immune system attacks the thyroid. Hashimoto’s, the most common cause of hypothyroidism, can be detected by a blood test showing elevated *thyroid peroxidase* (TPO) antibodies.

“If you’re not making enough thyroid hormones,” says Sanchez, “the only way to get them is to take a thyroid medication,” either synthetic or natural thyroxine. “Which one works better depends on the individual.”

Deeper Causes

In addition to conventional medication there are ways to naturally support an underperforming thyroid. According to Sanchez, “the immune system is the missing link for many people” when it comes to diagnosing and treating hypothyroidism. “We look at diet and how the body is digesting and absorbing nutrients. With ‘leaky gut,’ foods leak into the bloodstream, causing an immune reaction,” she says.

Sanchez suggests undergoing a detoxification protocol under a practitioner’s direction and eating “a healthy, organic, whole-foods, plant-based diet.” You may want to avoid *gluten*, a protein found in wheat and other grains that many people have problems with, because “research indicates a positive correlation between gluten intolerance and Hashimoto’s disease,” Sanchez says. Uncooked cruciferous vegetables—broccoli, Brussels sprouts, kale, etc.—“have been shown to impede thyroid function,

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MALADY

makeover

so don't eat too many of them raw," she advises. And drink plenty of clean, reverse-osmosis-filtered water.

Sanchez recommends getting enough **vitamin D**, ideally from moderate sun exposure plus supplements; check your levels with periodic blood tests. She says that proper thyroid function also requires adequate amounts of **selenium, magnesium, zinc, vitamin A** and **vitamin B**. Herbs such as **ashwagandha, eleuthero** and **rhodiola** "help balance the adrenal system," Sanchez notes. That's because these herbs act as *adaptogens*, or substances that help the body deal with stress.

Sanchez also recommends getting optimal amounts of sleep and exercise for stress relief, along with practicing meditation and yoga. "An elevation in the stress hormones (cortisol and

adrenalin) opposes thyroid hormones," she explains. (To learn about different style of yoga, see "A Yoga Potpourri" on page 38.) So does *estrogen dominance*—more estrogen, less progesterone—resulting from perimenopause's fluctuating hormone levels. Risk for hypothyroidism increases if it runs in your family or you have other autoimmune diseases, or if you've been pregnant or have delivered a baby within the past six months.

If tests show you are hypothyroid, deal with the disorder as soon as possible—especially if you're pregnant, to avoid miscarriage. Other possible complications include goiter (thyroid enlargement) or heart problems.

Take care of your thyroid and it will take care of you—and help keep your whole body healthy. —*Claire Sykes*

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