

Hidden thyroid dysfunction can wreak havoc

As the snow melts, many are getting ready for outdoor living such as gardening and physical recreation. It's time to tidy the yard. It's time to feel energized. If you have hidden hypothyroidism, however, you may need to do more sprucing up than anticipated...

Our thyroid function is critical for energy, mood, metabolism and mental clarity. When it's not doing its job, we can experience fatigue, depression, muscle weakness and weight gain.

These symptoms are pretty self-evident, one might think. Surprisingly, people with thyroid dysfunction are often unaware and some might argue, underdiagnosed. Its onset is gradual, but its impacts are unmistakable.

Have you heard of the cute furry creatures called voles? I really hadn't, until my neighbour informed me that they had burrowed tunnels through his newly grassed yard, eating away the roots as they wove their way through a vast snow-covered labyrinth.

Throughout winter, the stark white abyss of repeatedly falling snow would give no sign of the turmoil underneath. It wasn't obvious until the snow started melting away, but by then the damage was done. The grass would need to be reseeded. A new start; filling the foundation from the ground up. This is not unlike the impacts of hypothyroidism on the body, when left untreated.

So how do we know if something is off? Every day, I see patients in my practice that know something is not right. They may notice dry skin, constipation and cold intolerance. They may be at their highest weight ever and can't even muster the energy to go for a walk.

One woman shared with me about her lifelong struggle with weight. Over the last year, she gained more weight than ever, despite strict meal planning. When she presented for her physical exam needing help and hope, she was instead told, "Look at you. You just need to move". Upon investigation, she found out that she had overt hypothyroidism. Thankfully, correcting it improved her energy, muscle strength and motivation, and spurred weight loss she hadn't had in years.

For many experiencing the above symptoms, their physician astutely agrees it's worthwhile investigating. Yet after checking their thyroid, they're often told everything's "normal", left with less guidance and more guilt.

TSH (thyroid stimulating hormone) is a marker of thyroid function, measured in blood. It signals the thyroid gland to produce T4, regulating our body's energy, metabolism and hormone function. I like to describe it as nagging the thyroid gland: the higher the number, the louder it is. If the thyroid gland can't respond, the nagging will get louder, and more annoying.

TSH is well-recognized as the primary screening tool (although there are others), yet clinicians often disagree on the precise number that requires treatment, which reinforces the importance of treating the *person*, not merely the number.

This is especially so, since thyroid function has crossover with estradiol, progesterone, testosterone and our main stress hormone, cortisol. If you notice symptoms the above, as well as hair loss, eyebrow thinning or heavy menstrual periods, this may be a sign your hormones aren't the only area involved.

In that case, it's time to look deeper. You may uncover hidden thyroid dysfunction in the body, like voles under the snow. I have nothing against voles. In fact, I'd consider them to be quite sweet. Evidence shows that they are among only 3% of mammals that form close monogamous bonds with their partner for life. Behavioural studies even suggest that the female vole nags the male if he is not assisting sufficiently with the young. Let's remember this when we're sprucing up our gardens, and our health. You know your own body best, and if it's nagging at you, you'd best listen.

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