Your problems could be your Thyroid: Hypothyroidism

Most people realize that their thyroid is important for controlling their metabolism and body weight.

But did you know that depression, heart disease, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, PMS (premenstrual syndrome), menopausal symptoms, muscle and joint pains, irritable bowel syndrome, or autoimmune disease could actually indicate a problem with your thyroid?

The classic signs of a sluggish thyroid gland include weight gain, lethargy, poor quality hair and nails, hair loss, dry skin, fatigue, cold hands and feet, and constipation -- and these symptoms are relatively well known.

However, some of the conditions *you might not associate with your thyroid* include:

- **High cholesterol**
- **Irregular menstruation**
- **Low libido**
- **Infertility**
- **Gum disease**
- **Fluid retention**
- **Skin conditions such as acne and eczema**
- **Memory problems**
- **Poor stamina**

There are many more conditions that can be associated with poor thyroid function. Your thyroid plays a part in nearly every physiological process. When it is out of balance, so are you. This is why it is so important to understand how your thyroid gland works and what can cause it to run amok.

The sad fact is *many people with hypothyroidism are never diagnosed*.

Hypothyroidism: The Hidden Epidemic

Hypothyroidism simply means you have a sluggish or underactive thyroid, which is producing less than adequate amounts of thyroid hormone. Thyroid problems have unfortunately become quite common.

The same lifestyle factors contributing to high rates of obesity, cancer and diabetes are wreaking havoc on your thyroid… sugar processed foods, stress, environmental toxins, and lack of exercise are heavy contributors.

Understanding How Your Thyroid Works is Step One

The thyroid gland is in the front of your neck and is part of your endocrine, or hormonal, system. It produces the master metabolism hormones that control every function in your body (3). Thyroid hormones interact with all your other hormones including insulin, cortisol, and sex hormones like oestrogen, progesterone, and testosterone. The fact that these hormones are all tied together and in constant communication explains why an unhappy thyroid is associated with so many widespread symptoms and diseases.

This small gland produces two major thyroid hormones: T4 and T3. About 90 percent of the hormone produced by the gland is in the form of T4, the inactive form. Your liver converts this T4 into T3, the active form, with the help of an enzyme.

Your thyroid also produces T2, yet another hormone, which currently is the least understood component of thyroid function and the subject of much ongoing study.

Thyroid hormones work in a feedback loop with your brain -- particularly your pituitary and hypothalamus -- in regulating the release of thyroid hormone. Your pituitary makes TRH (thyroid releasing hormone), and your hypothalamus makes TSH (thyroid stimulating hormone). If everything is working properly, you will make what you need and you'll have the proper amounts of T3 and T4.

Those two hormones -- T3 and T4 -- are what control the metabolism of every cell in your body. But their delicate balance can be disrupted by nutritional imbalances, toxins, allergens, infections and **stress.** If your T3 is inadequate, either by insufficient production or not converting properly from T4, your whole system suffers.

You see, T3 is critically important because it tells the nucleus of your cells to send messages to your DNA to crank up your metabolism by burning fat. That is why T3 lowers cholesterol levels, regrows hair, and helps keep you lean.

How to Know if You are Hypothyroid

Identifying hypothyroidism and its cause is tricky business. Many of the symptoms overlap with other disorders, and many are vague. But you can provide the missing clues!

The more vigilant you can be in assessing your own symptoms and risk factors and presenting the complete picture to your Doctor in an organized way, the easier it will be for your Doctor to help you.

Sometimes people with hypothyroidism have significant fatigue or sluggishness, especially in the morning. You may have hoarseness for no apparent reason. Often hypothyroid people are slow to warm up, even in a sauna, and don't sweat with mild exercise. Low mood and depression are common.

Sluggish bowels and constipation are major clues, especially if you already get adequate water and fibre.

Are the upper outer third of your eyebrows thin or missing? This is sometimes an indication of low thyroid. Chronic recurrent infections are also seen because thyroid function is important for your immune system.

Another telltale sign of hypothyroidism is a low basal body temperature (BBT), less than 97.6 degrees F (4) averaged over a minimum of 3 days. It is best to obtain a BBT thermometer to assess this.

How about your family history? Do you have close relatives with thyroid issues?

Some of the family history that suggests you could have a higher risk for hypothyroidism includes:

- High or low thyroid function
- Goiter
- Prematurely gray hair
- Diabetes
- Autoimmune diseases (rheumatoid arthritis, lupus)
- Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis
- Multiple sclerosis (MS)
- Elevated cholesterol levels

There are many more -- too many to list here.

If you suspect you might be hypothyroid, you should see a Doctor who can evaluate this, including ordering the basic lab tests for thyroid function.

Keeping Your Thyroid Healthy in a Toxic World

Now that you have some understanding of the importance of your thyroid and how it works, let's take a look at the factors that can readily cause problems with your thyroid gland.

Diet

Your lifestyle choices dictate, to a great degree, how well your thyroid will function.

Eliminate junk food, processed food, artificial sweeteners, trans-fats, and anything with chemical ingredients. Eat whole, unprocessed foods, and choose as many organics as possible.

Gluten and Other Food Sensitivities

Gluten and food sensitivities (6) are among the most common causes of thyroid dysfunction because they cause inflammation.

Gluten causes autoimmune responses in many people and can be responsible for Hashimoto's thyroiditis, a common autoimmune thyroid condition. Many people with Hashimoto's thyroiditis have an autoimmune reaction to gluten, and it usually goes unrecognized.

How this works is, gluten can cause your gastrointestinal system to malfunction, so foods you eat aren't completely digested (aka Leaky Gut Syndrome (7)). These food particles can then be absorbed into your bloodstream where your body misidentifies them as antigens -- substances that shouldn't be there -- our body then produces antibodies against them. These antigens are similar to molecules in your thyroid gland. So your body accidentally attacks your thyroid. This is known as an autoimmune reaction or one in which your body actually attacks itself.

Testing can be done for gluten and other food sensitivities.

Soy

Another food that is *bad for your thyroid* is soy (9) Soy is NOT the health food the agricultural and food companies would have you believe.

Soy is high in isoflavones (or goitrogens), which are damaging to your thyroid gland. Thousands of studies now link soy foods to malnutrition, digestive stress, immune system weakness, cognitive decline, reproductive disorders, infertility and a host of other problems ... in addition to damaging your thyroid (10). Properly fermented organic soy products are fine ... it's the unfermented soy products that you should stay away from.

Coconut Oil

Coconut oil is a good food to eat for your thyroid (11). Coconut oil is a saturated fat comprised of medium chain triglycerides (MCTs), which are known to increase metabolism. However it is not recommended that you have high levels of saturated fats as these cause increased weight and other negative health issues.

Coconut oil is very stable (shelf life of 3 to 5 years at room temperature), so your body is much less burdened with oxidative stress than it is from many other vegetable oils. And coconut oil does not interfere with T4 to T3 conversion the way other oils can.

Iodine

Iodine is a key component of thyroid hormone (12) In fact, the names of the different forms of thyroid hormone reflect the number of iodine molecules attached -- T4 has four attached iodine molecules, and T3 has three -- showing what an important part iodine plays in thyroid biochemistry.

If you aren't getting enough iodine in your diet (13), no matter how healthy your thyroid gland is, it won't have the raw materials to make enough thyroid hormone. Chlorine, fluorine and bromine are also culprits in thyroid function, and since they are halides like iodine, they compete for your iodine receptors. If you are exposed to a lot of bromine, you will not hold on to the iodine you need. Bromine is present in many places in your everyday world -- plastics, pesticides, hot tub treatments, fire retardants, some flours and bakery goods, and even some soft drinks.

Also make sure the water you drink is filtered. Fluoride is particularly damaging to your thyroid gland (14). Not all water filters remove fluoride, so make sure the one you have does.

Stress and Adrenal Function

Stress is one of the worst thyroid offenders. Your thyroid function is intimately tied to your adrenal function, which is intimately affected by how you handle stress.

Many of us are under chronic stress, which results in increased adrenalin and cortisol levels, and elevated cortisol has a negative impact on thyroid function. Thyroid hormone levels drop during stress, *while you actually need more thyroid hormones during stressful times.*

When stress becomes chronic, the flood of stress chemicals (adrenalin and cortisol) produced by your adrenal glands interferes with thyroid hormones and can contribute to obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, unstable blood sugar, and more. A prolonged stress response can lead to adrenal exhaustion (16) (also known as adrenal fatigue), which is often found alongside thyroid disease.

Environmental toxins place additional stress on your body. Pollutants such as petrochemicals, organochlorines, pesticides and chemical food additives negatively affect thyroid function.

One of the best de-stressors is exercise, which is why it is so beneficial for your thyroid.

Exercise directly stimulates your thyroid gland to secrete more thyroid hormone. Exercise also increases the sensitivity of all your tissues to thyroid hormone. It is even thought that many of the health benefits of exercise *stem directly from improved thyroid function*.

Even something as simple as a 30-minute walk is a great form of exercise, and all you need is a good pair of walking shoes. Don't forget to add strength training to your exercise routine, because increasing your muscle mass helps raise your metabolic rate. Also make sure you are getting enough sleep. Inadequate sleep contributes to stress and prevents your body from regenerating fully.

Finally, one excellent way to reduce stress is by learning how to meditate using Brainwave Entrainment techniques.

Treatment Options for a Sluggish Thyroid

Here are some suggestions that can be used for general support of your thyroid, as well as treating an underperforming one:

- Eat plenty of sea vegetables such as seaweed, which are rich in minerals and iodine (hijiki, wakame, arame, dulse, nori, and kombu). This is probably the most ideal form of iodine supplementation as it is also loaded with many other beneficial nutrients.
- Eat Brazil nuts, which are rich in selenium.
- Get plenty of sunlight to optimize your vitamin D levels; if you live where sunlight is limited, use vitamin D3 supplementation (18).
- Eat foods rich in vitamin A, such as dandelion greens, carrots, spinach, kale, Swiss chard, collard greens, and sweet potatoes.
- Make sure you are eating enough omega-3 fatty acids.
- Use pure, organic coconut oil in your cooking -- it's great for stir fries and sautéing many different meats and vegetables.
- Filter your drinking water *and* your bathing water.
- Filter your air, since it is one of the ways you take in environmental pollutants.
- Use an infrared sauna to help your body combat infections and detoxify from petrochemicals, metals, PCBs, pesticides and mercury.
- Take active steps to minimize your stress ... relaxation, meditation, hot soaks, EFT, *whatever works for you.*
- Exercise, exercise, exercise!

Thyroid Hormone Replacement

If you know your thyroid function is poor, despite making the supportive lifestyle changes already discussed, then it might be time to look at thyroid supplementation.

Taking thyroid hormone should be done only after you have ruled out other conditions that could be causing the thyroid dysfunction such as adrenal fatigue, gluten or other food allergies, hormonal imbalance, etc. It is always best to get your thyroid working again by treating the underlying cause, as opposed to taking an external source of thyroid hormone.

But sometimes supplementation is necessary.

Final Thoughts

A thyroid problem is no different than any other chronic illness -- you must address the underlying issues if you hope to correct the problem. The path to wellness may involve a variety of twists and turns before you find what works for you.

But hang in there.

If you approach it from a comprehensive, holistic perspective, you will find in time that all of the little steps you take will ultimately result in your feeling much better than you could have ever imagined.

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