

Thyroid Diseases and Treatments

Your Thyroid and Its Functions

Your thyroid is a butterfly-shaped gland located just below your Adam's apple. It is in front of and to the sides of your trachea, or windpipe. Your thyroid absorbs iodine from your body. It uses the iodine to produce hormones that regulate how your body uses energy (your metabolism).

Thyroid Diseases and Treatments

About one in every 14 Americans has some form of thyroid disease. It is far more common in women than men.

Thyroid disease normally involves one of three conditions: hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid), hyperthyroidism (overactive thyroid) or development of nodules (growths).

Hypothyroidism

Hypothyroidism occurs when your thyroid does not produce enough hormones to correctly regulate the rate your body uses energy.

Signs and symptoms may include:

- fatigue
- depression
- forgetfulness
- feeling cold
- dry skin and hair
- increased menstrual flow
- weight gain
- constipation.

The most common form of hypothyroidism is Hashimoto's thyroiditis. It causes the body's immune system to attack the thyroid and keep it from producing enough thyroid hormone.

Treatment for hypothyroidism normally consists of taking medicine (pills) containing thyroid hormone. If you take thyroid medicine, the dosage will increase over a period of time until you reach a normal hormone level. You will need blood tests from time to time to make sure that your hormone level stays normal. You will most likely need to take the medicine for life.

Hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism occurs when your thyroid produces too much thyroid hormone. This forces your body to use more energy than it should.

Some possible signs and symptoms are:

- nervousness and irritability
- fatigue
- muscle weakness
- tremors
- rapid heart beat
- warm skin, feeling hot
- increased perspiration
- more frequent bowel movements
- vision problems
- decreased menstrual flow
- thinning hair
- weight loss.

(over)

Graves' disease is the most common cause of hyperthyroidism. It is an autoimmune disease that causes the thyroid to be too active.

The most common treatment for hyperthyroidism is radioactive iodine treatment. If you receive radioactive iodine, only your thyroid absorbs it. The treatment destroys some or all of your thyroid's hormone production. If your thyroid becomes underactive, you can be treated for hypothyroidism.

Another treatment available is a drug to slow down your thyroid's hormone production. It is difficult to maintain a normal hormone level with this treatment, and there can be serious side effects.

Hyperthyroidism can also be treated with surgery to remove all or part of the thyroid.

Thyroid nodules

Thyroid nodules are lumps that form in your thyroid. They vary in size and are normally harmless. However, a small number of thyroid nodules turn cancerous. If you develop thyroid nodules, it is important to have them checked by your health care provider.

To check a nodule your provider will perform a simple procedure called a fine needle aspiration, or biopsy. The procedure removes a sample of the nodule for testing.