

January is Thyroid Awareness Month

According to the Thyroid Foundation of Canada, 30 percent of Canadians — over 10 million people — may suffer from a thyroid condition of one type or another, many of them undiagnosed.

What does the Thyroid gland do?

Thyroid hormones regulate our metabolism and organ function. They directly affect body functions such as heart rate, cholesterol levels, body weight, energy, muscle contraction and relaxation, skin and hair texture, bowel function, fertility, menstrual regularity, memory and mood.

Without adequate thyroid hormones, every system in the body slows down. Those who suffer from hypothyroidism, low thyroid function, feel tired and tend to sleep a lot. Their digestion is slow and weight gain typically occurs. They can also experience extremely dry skin, hair loss, even slower mental processes.

What's really slowing your thyroid down?

Hypothyroidism is a complex disorder that can stem from a number of different causes, including:

1. The thyroid may fail to produce enough thyroid hormones as a result of an autoimmune response against the thyroid (Hashimoto's thyroiditis) or other problems with the function of the thyroid gland itself.
2. Toxic levels of mercury, typically resulting from mercury fillings in the mouth or consuming large amounts of mercury-laden ocean fish, may inhibit thyroid gland function.
3. High levels of estrogen, or a converse deficiency of progesterone, can inhibit thyroid function. Many menopausal women using estrogen-replacement therapy may develop the symptoms of an underactive thyroid. Menopausal women who are already taking medication for hypothyroidism may also need to increase their dosage if they choose to use hormone-replacement therapy (HRT).
4. Excess consumption of soy-based foods and beverages may decrease the activity of thyroid hormones in the body.
5. Nutritional deficiencies may prevent the proper manufacture or function of thyroid hormones in the body. For example, iodine and tyrosine are necessary for the formation of thyroid hormones, while selenium is necessary for the normal function of thyroid hormones. Many individuals with decreased thyroid-hormone levels also have a zinc deficiency.
6. Long periods of elevated stress can tax the adrenal glands, and secondarily affect the function of the thyroid

What are the symptoms to watch out for?

The symptoms of underactive thyroid disease can vary, and not all individuals will show the same signs:

Frequently feeling cold or having an intolerance of cold temperatures

Dry skin, brittle hair and splitting nails

Lack of or diminished ability to sweat during exercise

Hair loss

Irregular menses or heavy menstrual bleeding

Poor memory

Depression

Decreased libido

Constipation

Unexplained fatigue or lethargy

Unexplained weight gain or an inability to lose weight

Many individuals with hypothyroidism have associated iron-deficient anemia and/or high cholesterol

How is hypothyroidism diagnosed?

Four tests — thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH), Free T3, Free T4 and thyroid antibodies — are required to accurately assess the function of the thyroid gland, our master gland of metabolism. An optimal TSH level should be less than 2.0, not the currently accepted 4.7 reported by most labs. T3 and T4 should be in the middle of your lab's reference range, and your thyroid antibodies should be negative.

However, many women experience low thyroid symptoms but have normal blood tests. I generally recommend my patients measure their morning oral body temperature. Low temperatures can be indicative of low thyroid function.

Additionally, there are specific urine tests that Naturopathic Doctors can order that can be done to rule in or out abnormal thyroid function

Natural treatment options for thyroid support

If you are experiencing thyroid symptom even after your doctor has told you your thyroid is "normal," there are natural ways you can support thyroid function — especially if your TSH is between 2.0 and 4.7 or if your body temperature is below 37 C/ 98.6 F

The first thing to do is figure out why your thyroid gland may be under-functioning. Many hormonal imbalances can cause this, as can excessive stress and environmental toxin build up.

Depending on the cause a few simple treatment options are:

IR Sauna: This treatment is a great way to both detoxify many environmental toxins and heavy metals and relax at the same time.

Yoga/Meditation: There are so many reasons that yoga and meditation are great, but the impact on stress can not be over-stated. Reducing stress levels can reduce the strain on the adrenal glands, and thus the thyroid gland.

Ashwaganda: This supplement may increase both thyroxine (T4) and its more potent counterpart, active thyroid hormone (T3). Ashwaganda appears to boost thyroid function without influencing the release of the TSH, indicating that it works directly on the thyroid gland and other body tissues. This is good news, since thyroid problems most often occur within the thyroid gland itself, or in the conversion of T4 into T3 in tissues outside the thyroid gland. Take 750-1,000 mg twice a day.

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L-Tyrosine: The amino acid tyrosine is necessary for the production of thyroid hormone in the body. It takes four weeks to reach full effectiveness, so starting this at the beginning of a weight-loss program is a good idea. Seeing as tyrosine increases the production of both dopamine and thyroid hormone, it could give you just the boost you need to push past your plateau. The recommended dose is 1,000 mg on rising, before breakfast. Do not take this supplement if you have high blood pressure.

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