



Hypothyroidism

When your thyroid gland does not make enough thyroid hormone, it is called hypothyroidism. The thyroid gland is in the front, lower part of the neck. It normally produces thyroid hormone, which is important in regulating your metabolism (the way your body uses food to produce energy). Too little thyroid hormone affects your whole body. It can make you feel weak and tired.

A normal, working thyroid gland is very important for children because it helps them grow and develop. If a child is born with hypothyroidism, and does not get treatment, it can lead to mental retardation. About 1 in 4000 infants is born without a functioning thyroid gland. Newborn screening tests now find this condition and early treatment can prevent mental retardation.

Symptoms

Most thyroid problems happen later in life, especially after the age of 50. Women get them 8 to 10 times more often than men. Symptoms of too little thyroid hormone include:

- persistent fatigue
- slow heart rate
- depression
- constipation
- dry skin and hair
- hair loss
- mild weight gain
- sensitivity to cold
- menstrual irregularities
- an enlarged thyroid gland in the neck

But having these symptoms does not always mean you have hypothyroidism. In fact, most people with these symptoms do not have it.

The most common thyroid disorder is called Hashimoto's thyroiditis. This specific type of hypothyroidism causes the body's immune system to attack thyroid tissue. In most cases, the thyroid gland is permanently damaged so it can't work properly. Other causes of hypothyroidism include pituitary problems, iodine deficiency, and certain medications—such as lithium. Another cause of hypothyroidism is the side-effects that can occur when being treated for too much thyroid hormone or hyperthyroidism.

Diagnosis

Call your health care professional if you have several of the symptoms listed above and they can't be explained by other things. He or she will examine you and review your medical history to see if further testing is needed. A blood test is usually given to confirm a diagnosis. The test measures a substance called thyroid stimulating hormone, or TSH. If the thyroid gland is not working well, the TSH level is almost always higher than normal

Treatment

Doctors usually prescribe thyroid hormone pills to treat hypothyroidism. If your doctor prescribes medication, take your pills each day as instructed. Taking too much can cause heart strain as well as lessen the amount of calcium in your body. Since low thyroid is usually permanent, do not stop taking your medication without talking to your doctor.

Your health care professional will check TSH blood levels from time to time to make sure that you are taking the correct amount of medicine. Different people need different amounts. It's important that you talk regularly with your health care professional and let him or her know how you're feeling. Children with hypothyroidism need to have their thyroid levels checked more often than adults. As TSH levels return to normal, all the symptoms of hypothyroidism should disappear.

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Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, Healthy Living classes, and much more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, Healthy Living programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.