

Hyperthyroidism and Hypothyroidism: Endocrine Disorders of the Thyroid Gland

Many Americans are becoming curious about thyroid disorders and how they affect overall health.

Both hyper- and hypothyroidism are conditions that affect the thyroid gland, an important part of the body's endocrine system. Hyper means "over or too much," suggesting that the thyroid is functioning above its normal levels – for example, overproducing or overworking. Hypo means "below or too little," suggesting that the thyroid is under producing or under working in some way. This, in fact, is the case.

In general, endocrine disorders – including both hyperthyroidism and hypothyroidism - can be complex, and require knowledge of an individual's complete medical history. Once diagnosed, changes can happen over-time that may require follow-up and specific diet and/or pharmaceutical measures as recommended by medical physician.

The endocrine glands, along with the nervous system, control and regulate the functions of the body. These glands secrete chemical substances like hormones that control the body processes and functions. Excess in one of the hormones – as occurs with hyperthyroidism – results from overproduction of the hormone, abnormal production of other hormones causing imbalance, or decreased excretion by the body.

Signs and symptoms of hyperthyroidism may include weight loss, increased body temperature and sweating, and increased alertness. High blood pressure, fast heart beat, shortness of breath, emotional swings, irritability and weakness are also common. Nervousness and increased activity along with fatigue are also frequently reported. Hyperthyroidism occurs 5 times more often in women than in men.

Hypothyroidism, also called myxedema, is a condition where the thyroid produces insufficient amounts of natural thyroid hormones. Commonly, hypothyroidism is thought to probably be an autoimmune disease. This results in a shrunken thyroid gland with little or no function. Hypothyroidism can also result from iodine deficiency, but this deficiency is rare today due to iodine supplementation of table salt. Synthroid is a very common medication to help with this medical condition.

Typical signs and symptoms of hypothyroidism include hoarseness, low speech, puffiness and swelling around the eye, drooping eyelids, and sparse, dry hair. Skin may also be coarse, dry and scaly. Modest weight gain is typical. Some

personality and psycho-emotional characteristics are also possible including forgetfulness or a gradual change in personality.

With many endocrine disorders, dietary measures can alleviate symptoms, and help assure adequate nutritional status and healthy weight maintenance. In aiming for nutrition to feel one's best, nothing beats the vitamins and minerals that come in a varied low-fat diet full of fruits and vegetables, grains, good sources of protein. The USDA Food Guide Pyramid recommends 3-5 vegetable servings and 2-4 fruit servings each day for optimal nutrition. By aiming for the high end of these ranges, one can meet or exceed the recommended dietary allowances (RDAs) for the various vitamins and minerals. Some individuals choose to take a regular multivitamin if they are not able to meet the recommendations.

Endocrine disorders are serious medical conditions requiring consultation and evaluation with a competent health care professional. Diagnosis and medical and dietary management of hyper- or hypothyroidism are done on an individual basis.

References:

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