



Hypothyroidism

Information for Patients

What is hypothyroidism?

Hypothyroidism (underactivity of the thyroid gland) occurs when the thyroid gland produces less than the normal amount of thyroid hormones. The result is the “slowing down” of many bodily functions. Although hypothyroidism may be temporary, it usually is a permanent condition. Some studies have shown that as many as 10% of women and 3% of men have hypothyroidism.

What are the symptoms of hypothyroidism?

In its earliest stage, hypothyroidism may cause few symptoms, since the body has the ability to partially compensate for a failing thyroid gland by increasing the stimulation to it, much like pressing down on the accelerator when climbing a hill to keep the car going the same speed. However, as thyroid hormone production decreases and the body’s metabolism slows, a variety of symptoms may result.

- ◆ Pervasive fatigue
- ◆ Drowsiness
- ◆ Forgetfulness
- ◆ Difficulty with learning
- ◆ Dry, brittle hair and nails
- ◆ Dry, itchy skin
- ◆ Puffy face
- ◆ Constipation

- ◆ Sore muscles
- ◆ Weight gain and fluid retention
- ◆ Heavy and/or irregular menstrual flow
- ◆ Increased frequency of miscarriages
- ◆ Increased sensitivity to many medications

What are the causes of hypothyroidism?

Autoimmune thyroiditis
(Hashimoto’s thyroiditis—separate brochure available)

The body’s immune system may produce a reaction in the thyroid gland that results in hypothyroidism and, most often, a goiter (enlargement of the thyroid). Other autoimmune diseases may be associated with this disorder, and additional family members may also be affected.

Radioactive iodine treatment

Hypothyroidism frequently develops as a desired therapeutic goal after the use of radioactive iodine treatment for hyperthyroidism.

Spontaneous onset

Underproduction of thyroid hormones (hypothyroidism) can occur for no apparent reason.

Thyroid operation

Hypothyroidism may be related to surgery on the thyroid gland, especially if most of the thyroid has been removed.

Medications

Lithium, high doses of iodine, and amiodarone (Cordarone, Pacerone) can cause hypothyroidism.



Subacute thyroiditis

Painful inflammation of the thyroid, the cause of which is unknown, may cause hypothyroidism after a period of overactivity (hyperthyroidism). Although the hypothyroidism is usually temporary, in a small percentage of cases, it may become permanent.

Postpartum thyroiditis

Shortly after pregnancy, the thyroid may go through a period of hyperthyroidism, followed by hypothyroidism, and then most often returns to normal function.

Congenital condition

An infant may be born with an inadequate amount of thyroid tissue or an enzyme defect that does not allow normal thyroid hormone production. If this condition is not treated promptly, physical stunting and/or mental damage (cretinism) may develop.

Pituitary hypothyroidism

Any destructive disease of the pituitary gland may cause damage to the cells that secrete Thyroid Stimulating Hormone (TSH), which stimulates the thyroid to produce normal amounts of thyroid hormone. This is a very rare cause of hypothyroidism.

How is hypothyroidism diagnosed?

Characteristic symptoms and physical signs, which can be detected by a physician, can signal hypothyroidism. However, the condition may develop so slowly that many patients do not realize that their body has changed, so it is critically important to perform diagnostic laboratory tests to confirm the diagnosis and to determine the cause of hypothyroidism.

TSH (thyroid-stimulating hormone or thyrotropin) test

An increased TSH level in the blood is the most accurate indicator of primary (non-pituitary) hypothyroidism. Production of this pituitary hormone is increased when the thyroid gland even slightly underproduces thyroid hormone.

Other tests

- ◆ Free T4 (thyroxine) - the active thyroid hormone in the blood. It is important to note that there is a range of free T4 levels in the blood of normal people, similar to the range for height, and that a value of free T4 that is "within normal limits" for the general population may not be appropriate for a particular individual.
- ◆ Thyroid autoantibodies - indicates the likelihood of autoimmune thyroiditis being the cause of hypothyroidism

A primary care physician may make the diagnosis of hypothyroidism, but assistance is often needed from an endocrinologist, a physician who is a specialist in thyroid diseases.

How is hypothyroidism treated?

Hypothyroidism is treated with a single daily dose of levothyroxine, given as a tablet. An experienced physician can prescribe the correct form and dosage to return the thyroid balance to normal. Older patients who may have underlying heart disease are usually started at a low dose and gradually increased while younger healthy patients can be started on full replacement doses at once. Thyroid hormone acts very slowly in the body, so it may take several months after treatment is started to notice improvement in symptoms.

Since most cases of hypothyroidism are permanent and often progressive, it is necessary to treat this condition throughout one's lifetime. Periodic monitoring of TSH levels and clinical status is necessary to ensure that the proper dose is being given, since medication doses may have to be adjusted from time to time. Optimal adjustment of thyroid hormone dosage is critical, since the body is very sensitive to even small changes in thyroid hormone levels. The tablets come in over 10 different strengths, and it is essential to take them in a consistent manner every day. A dose of thyroid hormone that is too low may fail to prevent enlargement of the thyroid gland, allow symptoms of hypothyroidism to persist, and be associated with increased serum cholesterol levels, which may increase the risk for atherosclerosis and heart disease. A dose that is too high can cause symptoms

