

JANUARY IS THYROID AWARENESS MONTH

Hypothyroidism is the most common thyroid disorder. It is a condition in which the thyroid gland does not produce enough thyroid hormone (thyroxine, T4).

What is the thyroid? The thyroid is a butterfly-shaped gland in the lower part of the neck, located below the voice box (larynx) and above the collar bones (clavicles). The thyroid gland produces two hormones – triiodothyronine (T3) and thyroxine (T4), which regulate how the body uses and stores energy (also known as the body’s metabolism).

Hypothyroidism Causes – In about 95 percent of cases, hypothyroidism is due to a problem in the thyroid gland itself and is called primary hypothyroidism. In some cases, hypothyroidism results from a decreased production of thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH) by the pituitary gland (called secondary hypothyroidism). Thyroid problems are common in women, increases with age, and are more common in Caucasians and Latinos.

Hypothyroidism Symptoms – General symptoms of hypothyroidism reflect slowing of the body’s metabolism and may include fatigue, sluggishness, weight gain and intolerance of cold temperatures.

- Skin – Hypothyroidism can cause decreased sweating. The skin may become dry and thick. The hair becomes coarse or thin, eyebrows may disappear, and nails may become brittle.
- Eyes – Hypothyroidism can cause mild swelling around the eyes.
- Cardiovascular system (Heart and blood vessels) – Hypothyroidism slows the heart rate and weakens the heart’s contractions, decreasing its overall function. Related symptoms may include fatigue and shortness of breath with exercise. These symptoms may be more severe in people who also have heart disease. Hypothyroidism may also cause mild high blood pressure and raise blood levels of cholesterol.
- Gastrointestinal System (Stomach and intestines) – Hypothyroidism slows the actions of the digestive system, causing constipation.
- Respiratory System – Women with hypothyroidism often have menstrual irregularities ranging from absent or infrequent and heavy menstrual periods. These menstrual irregularities can make it difficult to become pregnant and pregnant women with hypothyroidism have an increased risk for miscarriage during early pregnancy. Treatment of hypothyroidism can decrease the risk of miscarriage.

Hypothyroidism Diagnosis – In the past, hypothyroidism was not diagnosed until symptoms had been present for a long time. Blood tests can now detect hypothyroidism at an early stage. A person may be tested for hypothyroidism if there are signs and symptoms such as those discussed previously or as a screening test.

Hypothyroidism Treatments – The goal of hypothyroidism treatment is to return blood levels of TSH and T4 to the normal range and relieve the symptoms of hypothyroidism. The treatment for hypothyroidism is thyroid hormone replacement therapy. This is usually given as a pill form of thyroxine (T4) and should be taken once a day on an empty stomach. Generic (lertroxine) and brand name

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(Synthroid, Levoxyl, Levothroid, Unithroid, Tirosint) medications are usually equally effective. It is preferable to stay on the same medication rather than changing between brand name and/or generic medications.

For more information on hypothyroidism, consult your physician or advanced health care practitioner.

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