

Feeling lethargic, moody, tired, fat? It could be your thyroid

by Narelle Stegehuis

If your hormones are not 'in balance' then you can find yourself experiencing symptoms such as depression, headaches, insomnia, fatigue and weight gain. Thyroid disease is one of the most common hormone disorders, after insulin resistance and diabetes. The majority of individuals with thyroid imbalance has hypothyroidism (under-active thyroid). A small minority has hyperthyroidism (overactive thyroid). The problem is that symptoms of low thyroid function are often mistaken for depression, signs of ageing, or are not identified.

Your thyroid – a small butterfly-shaped gland located in the front of your neck – controls the functioning of every cell, organ and gland in your body. In addition, your thyroid regulates these functions:

- ▶ the use of oxygen in all tissues,
- ▶ the rate of repair of damaged or diseased tissues,
- ▶ your blood sugar levels by controlling the release of glucose (sugar) from the liver to the bloodstream,
- ▶ electrolyte and water balance in the cells and body,
- ▶ your circulatory system,
- ▶ the energy and strength of the muscles,
- ▶ the speed of the impulses going to the nerves
- ▶ your libido
- ▶ your fat metabolism.

Four main hormones produced by your thyroid gland directly affect your metabolism and body fat. They are thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH), triiodothyronine (T3), thyroxine/levo-thyroxin (T4), and calcitonin (used in calcium metabolism).

Although your thyroid gland secretes and regulates these hormones, about 80% of the body's T3 is produced outside the thyroid gland, in the liver, by chemical modification of thyroxine or T4.

Hypothyroid people gain weight because (i) their T4 is not being converted by the liver to the metabolically active form of T3 or (ii) the converted T3 hormone is not getting to the cellular level of the body – meaning that they are producing it, but their body can't use it.

Although most conventional practitioners only test for the inactive T4 hormone level, it is important to remember that active T3 thyroid hormone works inside every cell of the body – not only in the blood. If T3 isn't available at the cellular level, then those cells can't function properly. The T4 blood test does not test for this, but taking your body temperature does! I personally believe that your body temperature is the single best test of your thyroid function.

SYMPTOMS

Every cell and tissue in your body is affected by hypothyroidism and deficient levels of the active T3 thyroid hormone can produce one or more of the following symptoms weight gain, fatigue, weakness, constipation, shortness of breath, depression, irritability, poor memory, difficulty concentrating, intolerance to cold, low body temperature, dry coarse hair/dry skin, hair loss, muscle or joint pain and stiffness, headaches, decreased libido and elevated cholesterol or triglycerides.

Sadly, many hypothyroid symptoms are frequently dismissed by physicians as being a normal part of ageing, a psychological problem, overwork, or some other condition. As a result, thyroid tests are never performed and the patient never receives the proper medical treatment they require.

WHAT INTERFERES WITH THYROID FUNCTION?

- ▶ Insulin resistance/metabolic syndrome
- ▶ Chronic stress/adrenal depletion – there is a strong interplay between the thyroid and the adrenals. One is usually weak first and then weakens the other.
- ▶ Prescription drugs including Dilantin, Lithium, beta blockers, Premarin, birth control pills and some anti-depressants.
- ▶ Frequent X-rays – from dental or medical exams or radiation treatment to the head, neck or chest
- ▶ Thyroid inhibiting foods – Over-consumption of soy and raw thyroid-inhibiting foods, such as Brussels sprouts, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage and kale.
- ▶ Hormones – synthetic and genetically engineered hormones (oestrogen and other hormones) in meat, dairy, poultry and eggs. Also conditions such as polycystic ovarian disorder, fibroids, IVF treatment and menopause.
- ▶ Exercise – The receptors for the thyroid hormones are found deep within the cells, and exercise stimulates the thyroid by increasing oxygen to the cells. When you exercise and breathe more oxygen into your body, you speed up your metabolism and the heat in your body rises. So, to pump up your metabolism, you need to pump some iron to heat up your cell's 'fat burners' by giving them more oxygen.
- ▶ Dieting – During a restrictive diet that is either too low calorie or deficient in essential nutrients, the body produces less of the liver enzymes, thus converting less T4 and producing less T3. Perhaps the biggest problem with diets is that most leave you with less muscle and more fat than when you started. Researchers have found that low calorie and low carbohydrate

diets eventually suppress T3 hormone levels in the body by providing insufficient fuel for the thyroid and body to function properly.

- ▶ Heavy metal exposure – mercury is a toxic heavy metal, which comprises over 50% of 'silver' dental fillings and is found in cigarettes. Mercury interferes with the liver's production of 5-deiodinase, an enzyme that is critical in converting thyroid hormones.
- ▶ Chlorine – added to most municipal water supplies as a disinfectant.
- ▶ Fluoride – primary sources include toothpaste, dental products, municipal water supplies, pesticide, and residues on commercially grown foods.

TESTS FOR THYROID FUNCTION

If you are doing everything right and still feeling unwell, there is definitely something going on that needs to be addressed. Perhaps you are suffering from clinical hypothyroidism (an under-active thyroid) or sub-clinical hypothyroidism (you have symptoms but the blood tests are normal).

Let's assume you are overweight and think you have hypothyroidism. You've been to the doctor with complaints of weight gain, fatigue, cold hands and feet, and 'brain fog'. The doctor examines you and performs some blood tests, including thyroid tests, and all the tests come back normal. However you are sure you must have an under-active thyroid as you have all the symptoms, including a low body temperature, but the doctor decides to not prescribe any treatment. You go home, sentenced to a life of weight gain and feeling plain unwell. This scenario is played out again and again until one day you finally fall below the 'reference' ranges.

THE BARNES TEMPERATURE TEST

If you feel that your thyroid is sluggish and you think you may be hypothyroid, testing your thyroid is important. You can take the do-it-yourself Barnes Thyroid Temperature Test (see below), as an inexpensive, yet surprisingly accurate, initial test. Before the advent of the blood test, the Barnes basal temperature test and patients symptoms were all physicians had available to them to test thyroid function.

Doing the Barnes self temperature test will give you a starting point to determine if you may have hypothyroidism and need to have further confirmatory tests.

INSTRUCTIONS

Place a thermometer (preferably digital) within easy reach on the bedside table.

Place the thermometer in your armpit for five minutes. Try to move as little as possible because movement will raise your body temperature.

Record your temperature each morning for five days. (For women, additional consideration is needed during ovulation, since ovulation somewhat elevates temperature. Because of this, women who menstruate should start recording their temperature on the second or third day of menstruation.)

A reading of 36.4 degrees or lower may indicate low thyroid function.

SERUM (BLOOD) TEST FOR HYPOTHYROIDISM

If your temperature is low, you may want to request further testing. If you want to go the

conventional medical test route you need to request that your physician perform the T3, free T3, sensitive TSH, reverse T3, and anti-thyroid antibody tests. Remember that the standard T4 blood test for thyroid function only measures T4 (the inactive form of the hormone) function and is rarely sensitive enough to determine hypothyroidism. That is why I recommend that you ask your doctor to perform the other blood tests.

In my clinical experience, most thyroid blood tests will come back within a 'normal range', but the patient still shows signs of (sub-clinical) hypothyroidism such as a low body (basal) temperature, etc. There is research indicating that the reference ranges are too broad and do not cater for the individual – I guess we are not all the same after all!

The good news is that new and more accurate salivary and urine thyroid tests have become available.

THE SALIVARY THYROID TEST

Salivary and urine thyroid testing to the rescue! That's right. Your saliva and urine now hold the key to determining whether or not you have an under-active thyroid. This brand new technology promises to change the lives of the millions of individuals suffering with an undiagnosed under-active thyroid. Because it tests thyroid function at

the cellular level, the salivary/and or urine thyroid panel has been found to be more accurate than the blood tests in identifying an under-active thyroid.

The thyroid salivary test measures T3, T4 and free TSH. The salivary or urine thyroid test also measures antibodies against thyroperoxidase, an important enzyme involved in the production of thyroid hormone. Positive antibodies are a sign of an autoimmune process (the immune system attacking the body's own thyroid tissue).

REVIVING YOUR THYROID

If your thyroid gland is found to be sluggish, through any of the various tests, you may first try the natural non-drug approach to reviving your thyroid.

Identify what is causing it to be sluggish – e.g. stress, chemical exposure, etc.

Check your basal body temperature.

Consult your GP if necessary and request specific blood tests and discuss any possible need for medication changes.

Change your diet – different foods do interfere with thyroid function. You may wish to consult a naturopath for help with this.

Consult a herbalist – herbs such as withania, coleus, rehmania, kelp, etc., are helpful if used in the correct dosages.

Improve your liver function.

Avoiding the toxins I mentioned earlier and

increasing your intake of iodine-rich foods such as seafood, asparagus, sea vegetables (kelp), garlic, lima beans, sesame seeds, spinach, Swiss chard and sea salt can be helpful.


The bottom line is most of the above symptoms may sound familiar – it's not unusual for a 30, 40, or 50 something woman to feel tired, burnt out, and a little bit overweight and this makes hypothyroidism that much harder to diagnose. However there are few things more frustrating than feeling unwell, and it can take a while to get the right diagnosis. Remember though, if you are feeling unwell – there is most likely something triggering it. Ignoring the problem won't make it go away.

Getting a correct diagnosis is crucial when you realise that being treated can be a life-affirming event. So explore your options and strive for a better, healthy life!



Narelle Stegehuis, CEO of MassAttack, is a practising naturopath specialising in the research and development of natural treatment programs for women with hormonal imbalances, which

have contributed to such symptoms as weight gain, cravings, anxiety and mood swings. Uniquely for patient convenience her programs are also offered via the internet. She is both a prolific writer and recipient of the Australian Naturopathic Excellence Award 2006.



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