It is conservatively estimated that at least 60 million people in North America have some form of thyroid dysfunction. At least 10% of these people go undiagnosed. There remains a great deal of disagreement about making the diagnosis of thyroid disease between glandular specialists (endocrinologists) and natural health care practitioners. In this article, I discuss common thyroid disorders and their treatments and options.

Common Causes of Thyroid Damage

1. **Radiation exposure** – You’re exposed to a good deal of radiation in your lifetime and your thyroid is quite vulnerable to it. Cell phones, microwave ovens, laptop computers, smoke detectors, power lines, X-Rays, and CAT scans are all sources of thyroid-harming radiation.

2. **Soy Products** – Soy products were once thought to be beneficial to your health but recent research has discovered they’re anything but. Not only is a large majority of soy genetically modified (meaning it has pesticides built right in), it is also a potent source of goitrogens and estrogens that interfere with your thyroid’s natural balance. When consuming soy products, eat only organic, cultured soy products once a day at most.

3. **Medications** – Lithium for bipolar disorder, amiodarone for abnormal heart rhythms, nitroprusside for high blood pressure, and sulfonylureas for diabetes can trigger the development of thyroid disorders.

4. **Iodine Deficiency or Iodine Excess** – Iodine deficiency is one of the most common nutritional deficiencies. Too much or too little iodine can damage the thyroid. In 1990, the World Health Organization estimated that 28.9% of the population was iodine deficient. Severe iodine deficiency produces a large lump in the throat called a goiter. On the other hand, excessive iodine has been documented to result in thyroiditis, goiter, hypothyroidism, hyperthyroidism, and acne.

5. **Thyroid Toxic Foods** – The over-consumption of uncooked “goitrogenic” foods can weaken thyroid function and these foods include broccoli, Brussels sprouts, rutabaga, turnips, cauliflower, kohlrabi, radishes, cabbage, kale and millet. These foods, much like soy products, are non-toxic to the thyroid in moderate amounts. It’s only when one consumes these foods in large quantities that thyroid function is weakened.

6. **Other Thyroid Toxins** – Tobacco smoke, perchlorate, fluoride, fungal (candida) infestations, toxic heavy metals like mercury (dental fillings) and lead and a high sugar intake have also been reported to damage the thyroid.

7. **Stress** – Stress is a frequently overlooked cause of thyroid damage but is certainly one of the causes of suboptimal thyroid function. Chronic stress attacks the adrenal glands, which puts the body into a state of catabolism, meaning it is breaking down. When your body slows down to compensate, it can result in thyroid malfunction.

8. **Celiac Disease** – Recent studies have suggested a strong correlation between the autoimmune disorder, celiac disease, and thyroid dysfunction. Celiac disease is an autoimmune reaction to a protein found in wheat, barley, and rye called gluten.

Hypothyroidism – The Underactive Thyroid

The most common thyroid condition is underactive thyroid. There are three types of hypothyroidism.

- **Hashimoto’s Thyroiditis** – Hashimoto’s thyroiditis is the most common form of hypothyroidism. Hashimoto’s is an autoimmune condition in the same category of disease such as celiac disease, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, myasthenia gravis, scleroderma and ulcerative colitis. In Hashimoto’s the immune system mistakenly believes the thyroid gland is a foreign invader and attacks. Common symptoms of Hashimoto’s include anxiety, insomnia, fatigue, depression, hair loss, weight changes, muscle and joint aches and pains as well as fertility problems.

- **Post-Partum Hypothyroidism** – This type of thyroiditis usually occurs within 1-4 months after delivery. Thyroiditis is inflammation of the thyroid gland and can last anywhere from 2-8 weeks. This thyroid condition is usually not serious and goes away on its own as hormone levels begin to normalize.

- **Congenital Hypothyroidism** – Congenital hypothyroidism occurs at birth and is quite treatable if detected in the first few weeks of life. Symptoms of congenital hypothyroidism include increased birth weight, an enlarged tongue, feeding problems, chronic constipation, dry skin, a herniated bellybutton, failure to thrive, dry skin, low body temperature, and an enlarged soft spot.
Effective Treatments for Hypothyroidism:

For Mild Cases:

In cases where TSH is greater than 2.0 or underarm body temperatures are on average below 97.4 F, a combination of the following supplements can help return thyroid functioning to an optimal level:

- **L-Tyrosine** – The body will use this amino acid to manufacture more thyroid hormone.
- **Zinc Citrate or Picolinate** – Zinc and copper are both needed in the control of thyroid hormone production.
- **Copper Citrate** – The ideal zinc to copper ratio in the body is approximately 8:1 (zinc:copper).
- **Selenium** – This is required to help convert T4 (inactive) to T3 (active) thyroid hormone. Selenium is also important to prevent the formation of abnormal antibodies that can attack the thyroid leading to disease.
- **Vitamin D** – Vitamin D has been linked to both hypothyroidism and hyperthyroidism. Blood levels of 25-hydroxy vitamin D should be done prior to supplementation.
- **Iodine as Potassium Iodide** – Iodine is part of active thyroid hormone. The use of iodine is often strongly criticized by endocrinologists as potentially dangerous. Studies, however, have proven that most people can easily tolerate doses as high as 1000 mgs a day without any harm.
- **Homeopathic Thyroid** – There are reports that homeopathic thyroid is effective at reversing many of the signs and symptoms of an underactive thyroid.

If 6 weeks or more of this supplement regime fails to do much for any of the signs and symptoms, a trial therapy with natural desiccated thyroid (30 mg twice daily) is recommended. Lab tests and symptoms should be monitored and dosages adjusted accordingly. I must point out that this is a type of treatment that is vehemently opposed by conventional endocrinologists who insist that desiccated thyroid is unacceptable because it fails to maintain stable thyroid hormone blood levels. Endocrinologists believe that synthetic thyroid hormone (Synthroid, Eltroxin, L-throxine) is the correct treatment. Unfortunately, while synthetic thyroid hormone may return blood levels of T3 and T4 to normal, it does not always help the hypothyroid symptoms as well as desiccated thyroid. This remains an area of great debate between natural health care practitioners and endocrinologists. Personally, I prefer to treat the patient and not the blood tests.

In mild cases, the use of homeopathy or the supplementation of the amino acid L-tyrosine, zinc, copper, selenium and iodine combined with a sugar-free, caffeine-free diet can be used. Dosages of these nutrients depend on various biochemical tests as well as trial and error. For some cases, this may not be effective and actual thyroid hormone may be required.

The preferred thyroid hormone treatment is desiccated thyroid, which seems to be effective for at least 80% of the cases. For some this will not work and their thyroid can only be regulated by a pure T4 prescription (L-thyroxine). See a natural health care practitioner to get personalized therapy.

For Moderate to Severe Cases:

These are cases where natural thyroid boosting supplements have been tried for at least 6 weeks and no benefits have been seen. Usually the TSH is above 5.0 and there may even be a swelling in the thyroid gland area. In such cases, one should use desiccated thyroid starting at 30 mgs twice daily and monitor the hormone blood levels. In cases that are poorly controlled by the natural thyroid extract, the use of synthetic thyroid hormone may be needed.

In my experience, this may only be true for about 10% of individuals diagnosed with hypothyroidism.

Moderate or severe cases of hypothyroidism are best treated by a family physician. It’s usually a good idea to get an ultrasound done in order to rule out more serious thyroid conditions such as thyroid cancer. Most family doctors will refer their more difficult cases to an endocrinologist for further assessment and treatment.
Hyperthyroidism – The Overactive Thyroid

In hyperthyroidism, the thyroid gland produces too much of the thyroid hormone. There are two common types of hyperthyroidism.

✓ Grave's Disease – Grave’s disease is an autoimmune condition that commonly affects women under the age of 40. While the cause of Grave’s disease is unknown, it is usually associated with severe stress. Symptoms of Grave’s disease include goiter, bulging eyes, thickened skin over the shin area, rapid heart rate, thinning hair, nail problems, warm, moist skin, tremors, high blood pressure, nervousness, hyperactivity, increased perspiration, sudden weight loss, diarrhea, increased appetite, insomnia, fatigue, weakness, muscle pain, protruding eyeballs, blurred and double vision.

✓ Non-Immune Thyroiditis – Sometimes, inflammation of the thyroid gland occurs as a result of radiation exposure, certain medications, and excessive iodine intake.

Prognosis with conventional medical treatments is generally very good but varies from person to person. Conventional treatments include anti-thyroid drugs such as Tapazole, radioactive iodine, and surgery. Beta-blocker drugs may be required to prevent heart beat irregularities and high blood pressure in the more severe cases.

Natural treatments can often reduce or eliminate the need for drugs and surgery. This is especially true if the disease is in its early stages. The mineral lithium can suppress thyroid function almost as well as prescription anti-thyroid drugs with fewer side effects. Like calcium or zinc, lithium is a mineral. It is most often associated with the treatment of bipolar disease (manic depressive disease) but in these cases the dosages used are very high (1200 mg daily) and there are side effects that can adversely affect the kidneys.

In hyperthyroidism, the lithium dosages used are in the neighbourhood of 10 – 100 mg daily. One of the side effects of high dose lithium therapy, usually prescribed for bipolar illness, is hypothyroidism. The doses used for suppression of the thyroid gland are much less than those used in bipolar disorder and far less toxic. Toxicity of lithium can be curtailed by the use of omega-3 fatty acids, such as the ones found in fish and seafood. If you want to avoid eating fish because of their high mercury content, you can supplement with about 4000 mg of omega-3 oil capsules.

High doses of essential fatty acids (evening primrose oil, fish oils and flax seed oil) and mega doses of vitamin E (3000 IU or more daily) are also usually effective at cooling off an overactive thyroid gland.

Many foods help suppress thyroid function naturally and may be wise to increase in the diet of anyone suffering from a hyperthyroid state. These include broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, kale, mustard greens, peaches, pears, rutabagas, soybeans, spinach and turnips.

With proper treatment, most thyroid conditions can be cleared up naturally with a combination of dietary and lifestyle changes as well as proper supplementation.

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