



Information for Patients & Caregivers

What You Need to Know About Hypothyroidism in Adults

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The thyroid is a gland located in the neck, near the base of the throat. It produces a chemical called thyroid hormone that helps control our body functions such as heart rate, blood pressure and temperature.

WHAT IS HYPOTHYROIDISM?

Hypothyroidism is a condition where the thyroid gland is underactive and produces an insufficient amount of thyroid hormone to meet the body's needs.

Under normal conditions, the thyroid gland produces a certain amount of thyroid hormone that helps keep your body at the right energy level.

However, if the amount of thyroid hormone produced is too low, your body cells will not get enough of the hormone. This leads to a slowing down of the mental and physical processes of the whole body.

The most common symptoms of hypothyroidism are:

- Low mood or depression
- Weight gain despite poor appetite
- Dry and coarse skin
- Inability to bear cold
- Constipation
- Shortness of breath
- Irregular menses and infertility
- Weakness and muscle cramps
- Dry and thinning hair
- Hoarse or croaky voice
- Forgetfulness and poor concentration
- Slow growth in children

Symptoms usually develop slowly over several weeks and are initially mild but worsen as your thyroid hormone level becomes very low. Occasionally, the level of hypothyroidism is so mild that there are no obvious symptoms, and it can only be detected by blood tests.

You should have a regular thyroid function test and consult a doctor if you experience the above symptoms, as you may benefit from treatment.

WHAT CAUSES HYPOTHYROIDISM?

There are various causes of hypothyroidism. They include:

- **Insufficient intake of iodine.** This is the most common cause worldwide.
- **Autoimmune thyroid disease.** This is the most common cause in iodine-rich communities. It is a self-destructive process in which the body's immune system produces proteins that attack and destroy your thyroid gland leading to low thyroid hormone production.
- **Surgery or radiation treatment.** Some people with thyroid cancer or disease may have part or all their thyroid removed or destroyed by radiation treatment. If this happens, they may develop hypothyroidism.
- **Other causes** include inflammation of the thyroid gland and intake of medicine used in treatment of a hyperactive thyroid (hyperthyroidism).

HOW IS HYPOTHYROIDISM DIAGNOSED?

To diagnose hypothyroidism your doctor will take a medical history, perform a physical examination to look for signs that suggest hypothyroidism.

Your doctor will also order a series of blood tests and may request a scan of your thyroid gland.

If the diagnosis of hypothyroidism is made, your doctor may order additional tests to look for the main cause or refer you to a specialist for further assessment and treatment.

You should tell your doctor:

- About any change in your health condition that suggests your body is slowing down.
- If you have ever had thyroid surgery or radiation to your neck to treat cancer.
- About any medication you are taking.
- About any history of thyroid disease in your family.



SPECIALIST CARE

The specialist will talk to you in detail about the symptoms and other medical conditions you may be experiencing and how they affect your health.

The specialist will do a detailed examination and assessment of your thyroid function and, if it has not already been done, will request a thyroid scan and further blood tests.

Once all the tests are complete, the specialist will discuss your test results with you, outline the therapy and treatment options and the duration of your treatment.



MEDICATION FOR HYPOTHYROIDISM

The main medicine used for treating hypothyroidism is:

- **Synthetic Thyroxine - Levothyroxine.** This helps to replace the thyroid hormone that your body can no longer produce.

The main side effects of thyroxine replacement treatment are caused by taking an inadequate or excessive dose; hence it is important for you to take your medicines as prescribed by the doctor.

Forgetting to take medication will affect your blood test results and your health. If you take too little, your hypothyroidism will continue. If you take too much, you may develop symptoms of an overactive thyroid gland (hyperthyroidism).

The most common symptoms of excessive intake of thyroxine medicine include fatigue, inability to sleep, increased appetite, tremor, nervousness, inability to tolerate heat, weak

HOW IS HYPOTHYROIDISM TREATED?

There is no cure for hypothyroidism. But in most patients, symptoms can be completely controlled.

Hypothyroidism is treated by replacing the amount of thyroid hormone that your body lacks with a synthetic form, to bring your thyroid hormone level back to normal.

This treatment is called **Thyroxine replacement**. It helps correct the symptoms and restore your normal body function.

Most hypothyroid patients can be treated as outpatients, without having to be admitted to the hospital.

IMPORTANT TIPS:

- Tell your doctor if you are taking any other prescription or over-the-counter medication as this may affect your blood tests.
- If you have hypothyroidism and are planning to become pregnant you should see your doctor. You should have a thyroid function test before you become pregnant and very early in pregnancy, because you may need to change your medication and have more frequent tests.
- If you are already taking thyroxine replacement medicine and develop hyperthyroid symptoms you should see your doctor immediately for a thyroid function test.
- If your thyroid function test is abnormal, your dose may need to be adjusted.
- Tell your family members. Because thyroid disease runs in families, you should explain your hypothyroidism to your relatives and encourage them to get periodic thyroid blood tests.
- Do not stop your medication, unless advised by a doctor.

Levothyroxine is best taken in the morning, with water, on an empty stomach, at least 30 minutes before eating or drinking anything

FOLLOW UP

Regular checks are recommended for people who has hypothyroidism. It is very important to have a regular blood test (at least every year) to check that you have the right level of thyroid hormone in your blood.

You will need to have your blood tested after a thyroxine dose change. You may also need more frequent tests if you are taking a medicine that interferes with your body's ability to use thyroxine.

Once you have settled into a thyroxine dose, your doctor may order for thyroid tests about once a year.

Once diagnosed with hypothyroidism, you will need to take levothyroxine for the rest of your life.

DO NOT STOP YOUR MEDICATION, UNLESS ADVISED BY A DOCTOR

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Additional information on Hypothyroidism can be found in the National Clinical Guidelines published by the Ministry of Public Health in Qatar.

The Guideline is available for public on MOPH website:

www.moph.gov.qa

