

It's not you: It's your thyroid.

Recognizing the symptoms of thyroid disorders



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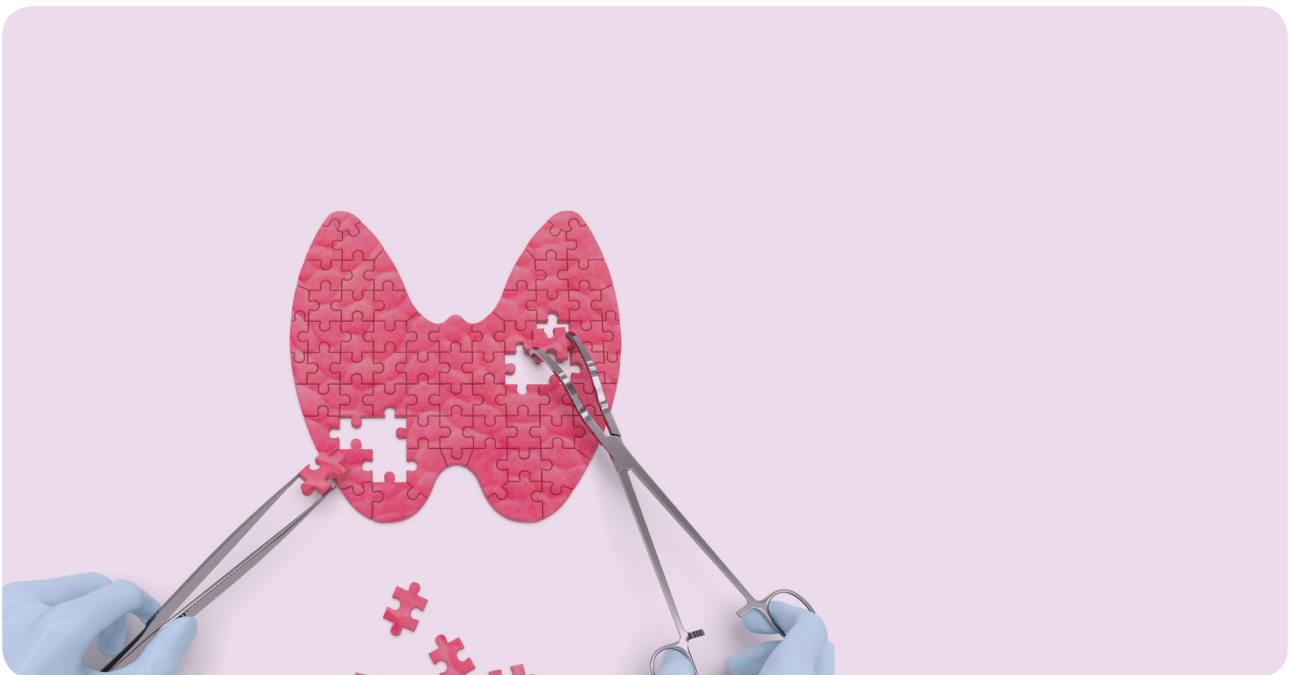
Introduction

Our fast-paced, modern lifestyles mean we switch off less and less. Many of us feel like there are never enough hours in the day. We put up with feeling tired, having trouble sleeping, or struggle with our weight. All these things we blame on ourselves and our busy lifestyles, but perhaps it's not you. You could have a thyroid disorder.

This booklet uncovers some common misconceptions about thyroid disorders and provides examples of where their symptoms can go unrecognized. There may be many explanations for these symptoms, but if you do have a thyroid disorder your doctor can help you find the right treatment so you can go back to feeling like you again.

If you are at all concerned after reading this brochure that you may be affected by a thyroid disorder, make an appointment with your doctor.

A simple blood test can check whether your thyroid gland is functioning normally.¹



The facts and figures of thyroid disorders

What is the thyroid gland?

The thyroid gland is a butterfly-shaped endocrine gland that sits at the lower front of the neck.² It controls metabolism and plays a key role in our health and wellbeing.³ Its job is to produce thyroid hormones, which are carried in the blood to every tissue in the body.⁴ These hormones are needed to make sure the tissues and organs of the body work properly. They help the body use energy, stay warm, and keep the brain, heart, muscles, and other organs working as they should.⁴



What causes thyroid disorders in adults?

There are two primary types of thyroid disorder: hypothyroidism and hyperthyroidism, which both have different causes and symptoms.

Hypothyroidism, or an underactive thyroid gland, is caused when the thyroid gland does not produce enough thyroid hormones. This means that the body's cells can't get enough thyroid hormones to work properly and the body's metabolism slows down.⁵

Hypothyroidism can have many causes, including autoimmune disease, damage to the thyroid gland, too much or too little iodine, and radiation treatment.⁵

Left untreated, the symptoms of hypothyroidism will usually progress, and can cause more serious complications and even become life-threatening.⁶

Hyperthyroidism, or an overactive thyroid gland, occurs when the thyroid gland releases too much thyroid hormone in the bloodstream, speeding up the body's metabolism.⁴ Hyperthyroidism tends to run in families, occurring most commonly in young women.⁴

The majority of cases of hyperthyroidism are caused by a condition called Graves' disease.⁴ In this condition, antibodies in the blood activate the thyroid gland, causing it to grow in size and secrete too much thyroid hormone.⁴ Another type of hyperthyroidism is characterized by nodules or lumps in the thyroid gland that increase the levels of thyroid hormone in the blood.¹

It is important that the symptoms of hyperthyroidism are not left untreated as serious complications can occur.⁷

Why are thyroid disorders hard to recognize?

When the thyroid gland is not working correctly it can cause a wide variety of common symptoms, such as tiredness, anxiety, weight fluctuations, menstrual problems, and difficulty sleeping.^{8,9} The symptoms are so diverse and varied because the thyroid gland helps to regulate many different functions in the body.⁴ Thyroid disorders can therefore be difficult to spot as their symptoms are not specific or unique, and they can be perceived as manifestations of a busy lifestyle. For this reason, thyroid disorders can remain unrecognized and undiagnosed.

How common are thyroid disorders?

Thyroid disorders are some of the most-frequent diseases in the world with about 1.6 billion people worldwide at risk.¹⁰

An underactive thyroid is more common in women than in men and its occurrence rises with age. By the age of 60, 17% of women and 8% of men suffer from an underactive thyroid.¹¹

An overactive thyroid is ten times more common in women than in men. It is most common in the age group of 20–40 years, but may occur at any age.¹²



It is easy to blame ourselves

There are a variety of symptoms that are easy to attribute to our 24/7 lifestyles but could potentially suggest a thyroid problem.

Remember: You are unique, and the number of symptoms you have and your experience of them will be unique to you.⁵

Your appearance



Weight gain/changes

If you've put on weight for no apparent reason, you may wonder where you're going wrong, and your family and friends may secretly blame your lack of willpower. Have you considered that an underactive thyroid gland could be responsible?^{8,13} Alternatively, if you're finding it hard to maintain your weight despite a good appetite, it could be due to an overactive thyroid (hyperthyroidism).^{9,13}

In a recent survey, 21% respondents could recall telling a loved one or friend to get over or accept struggling to lose or put on weight, despite adjustments to their diet and exercise as a part of life.¹⁴



Skin

Cold weather and central heating can make your skin feel dry and uncomfortable. Likewise, if you've been too busy to moisturize, you may blame yourself when it feels dry or rough. However, dry and flaky skin with coarse patches can be caused by an underactive thyroid gland.⁸



Sweating

It can be embarrassing if you find that you're sweating more than usual, especially if you have an important presentation to give and the spotlight is on you – or if you have moist palms and dread shaking hands. You may blame yourself for being nervous, but excessive sweating can be due to an overactive thyroid.⁹ Hyperthyroidism can also cause flushed skin and a warm sensation.⁹



Hair

Your friends might say you've only got yourself to blame if you have dry, brittle hair and frequently use heated styling aids to try new looks, but if you notice that your hair has become more coarse or dry than usual, or is breaking easily, it could be due to hypothyroidism. Hypothyroidism can cause hair loss and this may also affect your eyebrows and eyelashes.⁸ Hyperthyroidism can also cause hair loss.⁹



Nails

Many women put a manicure high on their list of beauty essentials, and with the choice available today it's tempting to try lots of different looks. If you have brittle nails you may believe that overuse of fashionable nail products has dried out your nails, but the cause of brittle, flaking nails could be an underactive thyroid.⁹



Eyes

These days many of us spend a huge part of our day staring at the computer screen – not only at work but when we get home too, so it's easy to blame the computer when our eyes feel sore. Likewise you may blame too many late nights for uncomfortable eyes, but did you know that people with thyroid disorders – either hyperthyroidism or hypothyroidism – can suffer with eyes that feel dry and gritty?^{8,9}

How you feel



Excessive tiredness

Today's hectic lifestyles mean that there's always so much to do and never enough hours in the day. Many of us work long hours and if you regularly squeeze in socializing, hobbies, or sport after a long working day, you may simply put tiredness and sluggishness down to not getting enough sleep, or to a poor work life balance. However, hypothyroidism can cause excessive tiredness,⁸ people who suffer with the opposite problem – hyperthyroidism – initially have a lot of energy, but later many eventually also feel tired due to overactivity.⁹

In a recent survey, almost half of respondents (49%) said that feeling tired/sluggish every day, feeling restless, or having difficulty sleeping could be blamed on their own lifestyle choices. In fact, 19% of respondents could recall telling a loved one or friend to get over it or accept feeling tired/sluggish every day as a part of life.¹⁴



Difficulty sleeping

When you feel tired during the day, it's frustrating when you do get the chance to sleep to find yourself lying awake in bed, or to wake up in the night and then feel unrefreshed for the busy day ahead. You may suspect your insomnia is connected to drinking too much coffee or alcohol, or perhaps due to shift work or jet lag if you travel a lot. However, did you know that thyroid disorders – both hyperthyroidism and hypothyroidism – can cause insomnia?^{8,9}

In a recent survey, almost a quarter (24%) of respondents said feeling restless and/or having difficulty sleeping is an issue they brush off as a day-to-day matter that they must deal with. And 30% of respondents didn't associate feeling restless and/or difficulty getting to sleep with thyroid disorders.¹⁴



How you feel



Poor concentration and memory loss

You may blame yourself for being forgetful and not showing enough interest when you're finding it difficult to concentrate or to remember even the simplest things that a friend or family member has told you. However, poor concentration or memory loss can be caused by an underactive thyroid.⁸ Conversely, racing thoughts and overactivity can sometimes be symptoms of hyperthyroidism rather than too much coffee or cola.⁹

In a recent survey, over a third (35%) of respondents didn't associate being unable to concentrate at work/school with thyroid disorders. Over a quarter of respondents (26%) said they blamed their own lifestyle choices.¹⁴



Lack of motivation

When you can't be bothered with everyday household chores no matter how hard you try, or you've lost your "can do" attitude at work, it's easy to blame yourself for being lazy, or wonder if you should be getting more rest. However, you could be feeling like this because you have low levels of thyroid hormone.⁸

In a recent survey, over a third (36%) of respondents didn't associate a lack of interest and struggling to feel motivated with thyroid disorders. Almost a third of respondents (31%) blamed these struggles on their own lifestyle choices, and 21% brushed them off as a day-to-day issue that they must deal with.¹⁴

In fact, 18% of respondents could recall telling a loved one or friend to get over or accept their lack of interest and struggling to feel motivated as a part of life.¹⁴



Sensitive to temperature

If you're always cold when others feel warm, this could be due to hypothyroidism rather than putting fashion over comfort and not wearing warm enough clothes.⁸ Conversely, a symptom of hyperthyroidism is being oversensitive to heat so that you feel warm and look flushed.⁹



Sex drive

If you've noticed a decrease in you or your partner's sex drive you may blame this on being tired and overworked, trying to juggle work and home life, but an underactive thyroid could be the cause.^{8,15} People with an overactive thyroid may experience an increased sex drive.⁹



Depression and anxiety

Depression can be caused by hypothyroidism,⁸ while anxiety can be caused by both an underactive or an overactive thyroid. Both of these are serious medical conditions so if you think you might be suffering from depression and anxiety, it's important to see your doctor.

In a recent survey, nearly a quarter (23%) of respondents could recall telling a loved one or friend to get over or accept feeling depressed, anxious, and irritable as a part of life. And the same amount of respondents didn't associate feeling depressed, anxious, and irritable with thyroid disorders.¹⁴



Irritability

Do you ever get annoyed or upset and take it personally when a colleague is irritable towards you for no apparent reason? Do friends and family sometimes criticize you for being snappy? You may think you're irritable because you're stressed, tired, or overworked and consider it a normal part of everyday life, but feeling irritable is a known symptom of both hypothyroidism and hyperthyroidism.¹⁶

In a recent survey, 40% of respondents said that struggling to lose or put on weight – despite adjustments to diet and exercise – could be blamed on their own lifestyle choices.¹⁴

40% of respondents also said that feeling depressed, anxious and irritable could be blamed on their own lifestyle choices.¹⁴

Changes in your body



Hearing

Many of us enjoy listening to music through our headphones and it's tempting to turn the volume up for our favourite songs. Your parents might say you'll damage your hearing, so if you think your hearing is getting worse you may blame yourself. However hypothyroidism can sometimes cause hearing loss and noises in the ears.⁸



Digestive system

If you suffer from gut problems, you may think it's due to a poor diet, grabbing junk food and takeaways on the move, or not drinking enough water. Digestive problems such as constipation, irritable bowel syndrome, and wind can sometimes be due to hypothyroidism,⁸ while hyperthyroidism can sometimes cause frequent bowel movements.⁴

*In a recent survey, **over a third of respondents (35%) said slow bowel movements and constipation could be blamed on their own lifestyle choices.** The same amount of respondents would not associate these symptoms with thyroid disorders.¹⁴*



Heart

If you get heart palpitations, you may put this down to feeling stressed when working to tight deadlines, or to drinking too much coffee or cola to try to keep alert during a long day. You may even think you've overexerted yourself at the gym or on the sports field. However, it's important to know that palpitations can be a symptom of hyperthyroidism.^{8,17}



Muscles and joints

You may think that muscle aches, pains, and weakness are normal after strenuous activities such as gardening, decorating, or sports. However, hyperthyroidism is a known cause of these symptoms.⁹ Furthermore, hypothyroidism can cause joint stiffness as well as muscle cramps and weakness.⁸



Menstrual cycle

It's easy to put menstrual problems down to a stressful life or a poor diet but hypothyroidism can upset your monthly cycle, causing a variety of menstrual problems, such as heavy or infrequent periods, or even a lack of periods.⁹ Also an underactive thyroid gland can cause changes in monthly cycles e.g. scanty or heavy periods or lack of periods.⁸

***A quarter of respondents said menstrual irregularities could be blamed on their own lifestyle choices.** Even more (30%) respondents didn't associate menstrual irregularities with thyroid disorders.¹⁴*



Certain times in your life

Trying for a baby

If you've been trying for a baby for a while with no success, you start to question yourself or your partner. It's important to know that thyroid disorders – both hypothyroidism and hyperthyroidism – can sometimes be the cause of fertility problems.^{8,9}

In a recent survey, almost a third (32%) of respondents would not associate difficulties getting pregnant with thyroid disorders.¹⁴



During pregnancy

The hormone changes that occur during pregnancy alter the way the thyroid gland works, which can lead to thyroid problems.¹⁸

After recently giving birth

Inflammation of the thyroid gland can occur in women who have recently had a baby. This can lead to both high and low levels of thyroid hormone.¹⁹

During the menopause

Symptoms such as fatigue, depression, mood swings, and sleep disturbances are often associated with the menopause, but they may also be signs of hypothyroidism.²⁰

It's not you. It's your thyroid.

As you will have seen it can be very easy to blame a busy lifestyle for many of the symptoms that are caused by thyroid disorders.

Don't blame yourself or your lifestyle. If you are experiencing any of these symptoms it's important to see your doctor. There is a simple blood test that can show if your symptoms are caused by a thyroid disorder.¹ If they are, there are a number of treatment options available.

If you would like to find out more about thyroid disorders, please visit the International Thyroid Awareness Week website: www.thyroidaware.com

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