

Thyroid Health 101: Understanding Diseases, Risk Factors and Nutrition

January is Thyroid Awareness Month. A butterfly-shaped gland located at the base of your neck, the thyroid produces hormones that have effects through the entire body ranging from heartbeat and blood flow, body temperature and respiratory or breathing rates to the regulation of the metabolism, reproductive hormones and the nervous system including digestive tract motility. Because this gland and its hormones impact so many systems in the body, thyroid disease can be very disruptive to health.

Types of Thyroid Diseases-Two main problems can occur with the thyroid gland: too much thyroid hormone (hyperthyroidism) or too little (hypothyroidism). Common symptoms of hyperthyroidism include heat intolerance, weight loss accompanied by an increased appetite, anxiety, nervousness, sleep disturbances, diarrhea or frequent bowel movements, shaky hands, muscle weakness, and even heart palpitations. Common symptoms of hypothyroidism include cold intolerance, weight gain, depression, fatigue, forgetfulness, joint and muscle pain, dry skin or hair, heavy or irregular menstrual cycles and constipation. In the U.S., hypothyroidism is estimated to be more common than hyperthyroidism.

Diagnosing and Treating Thyroid Disease-It's important to talk to your physician about thyroid health at routine check-ups. They may ask about your family and personal medical history, do a physical examination such as feeling your neck or asking you to swallow while touching your neck, run blood tests or even advise a biopsy for thyroid cancer diagnosis, if deemed necessary.

Nutrition and Thyroid Health

Here are some key nutrients that can affect the thyroid gland:

Iodine-The reason table salt is “iodized” is to help people avoid developing thyroid disease. Many people get enough iodine from foods such as milk and other dairy products, seafood (fish and shellfish) and eggs, but people who follow a vegan or vegetarian eating style may not consume enough iodine. Iodized table salt can provide iodine in your diet, but other types of salt such as Himalayan and sea salts may not contain iodine. Most adults in the U.S. get enough iodine, so eating a moderate amount of these foods is not a concern for many Americans.

Selenium-A trace mineral, selenium is essential, and studies have shown that being deficient may be linked to thyroid disease. Brazil nuts are the richest natural source of selenium, but they can increase the risk for selenium toxicity if eaten regularly. One ounce, or six to eight Brazil nuts, contains nearly 10 times the amount of selenium that is recommended daily. Other rich sources include seafood including tuna, halibut, and shrimp; chicken; turkey; pork products; eggs; and brown rice.

Zinc-Another essential mineral, zinc is important for thyroid health. Oysters are the richest source of zinc with 28 milligrams per 3 ounces cooked. Other good sources include beef and pork, pumpkin seeds and lentils. Eggs and dairy products such as milk and yogurt provide zinc but in lesser amounts.

Iron-An important mineral for many systems in the body, iron is critical for proper thyroid function. Iron from plants often is absorbed less than iron from animal sources. Including a source of vitamin C, such as citrus fruit, with plant-based sources of iron can help to increase absorption. Sources of iron include fortified breakfast cereal, beans, lentils, firm tofu, oysters, beef liver, sardines and a medium baked potato are good sources of iron.

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