

Frequently Asked Questions

What is thyroid disease?

The thyroid gland is located at the base of your neck in front of your trachea (or windpipe). The thyroid gland makes, stores, and releases two hormones—T4 (thyroxine) and T3 (triiodothyronine). Certain disorders can cause the thyroid gland to make too much or too little hormone. Women at risk of thyroid disease include those who have or have had an [autoimmune disorder](#) (such as [diabetes mellitus](#)).

What is the function of the thyroid gland?

Thyroid hormones control your metabolism, which is the rate at which every part of your body works. When your thyroid gland is working the way it should, your metabolism stays at a steady pace—not too fast or not too slow.

What controls the thyroid gland?

The thyroid gland is controlled by the [pituitary gland](#) (a gland in your brain). The pituitary gland makes [thyroid-stimulating hormone \(TSH\)](#). TSH tells the thyroid gland to make more hormone if needed.

How is thyroid disease diagnosed?

Thyroid disease is diagnosed by your symptoms, an exam, and tests. Your health care practitioner will examine your neck while you swallow. The thyroid gland moves when you swallow. This makes it easier for your health care practitioner to feel. Your health

care practitioner also may examine your skin and eyes and check your weight and temperature.

What tests are used to diagnose thyroid problems?

Tests may be used to help find the exact cause of a thyroid problem, including

- blood tests
- [ultrasound exam](#) of the thyroid
- thyroid scan

During a thyroid scan, you drink a small amount of radioactive iodine. A special camera then detects the areas of the thyroid gland that absorb the radioactive iodine. Results of this test show areas of the thyroid gland that are underactive or overactive. This test will not be done if you are pregnant.

What is hypothyroidism?

[Hypothyroidism](#) occurs when the thyroid gland does not make enough of the thyroid hormones to maintain your normal body metabolism.

What causes hypothyroidism?

The most common cause of hypothyroidism is a disorder known as thyroiditis—an inflammation of the thyroid gland. The most common type of thyroiditis is called Hashimoto disease, which causes an enlarged thyroid (also called a [goiter](#)). Hypothyroidism also can result from a diet that does not have enough iodine, but this type of hypothyroidism is rare in the United States.

What are the symptoms of hypothyroidism?

The symptoms of hypothyroidism are slow to develop. Common symptoms of hypothyroidism include

- fatigue or weakness
- weight gain
- decreased appetite
- change in menstrual periods

- loss of sex drive
- feeling cold when others do not
- constipation
- muscle aches
- puffiness around the eyes
- brittle nails
- hair loss

What treatment is available for hypothyroidism?

In most cases, hypothyroidism is treated with medication that contains thyroid hormone. The dosage of the medication is increased slowly until a normal level of thyroid hormone has been reached in the blood.

What is hyperthyroidism?

Hyperthyroidism results when the thyroid gland makes too much thyroid hormone. This causes your metabolism to speed up.

What are the causes of hyperthyroidism?

The most common cause of hyperthyroidism is a disorder known as Graves disease. It most often affects women between the ages of 20 and 40. A late sign of Graves disease is often a wide-eyed stare or bulging eyes.

Hyperthyroidism also may result from medication. Taking too much thyroid hormone when being treated for hypothyroidism can lead to symptoms of an overactive thyroid. Lumps in the thyroid called hot nodules are another cause. These lumps produce excess thyroid hormone.

What are the symptoms of hyperthyroidism?

Common symptoms of hyperthyroidism include

- fatigue
- weight loss

- nervousness
- rapid heart beat
- increased sweating
- feeling hot when others do not
- changes in menstrual periods
- more frequent bowel movements
- tremors

What treatment is available for hyperthyroidism?

Anti-thyroid medication can be used to reduce the amount of thyroid hormone your body is making. Medications called beta-blockers can control rapid heart beat.

If these medications do not help, your health care practitioner may suggest treatment with high-dose radioactive iodine to destroy parts of the thyroid gland. In some cases, surgery may be needed to remove the thyroid gland.

What are thyroid nodules?

A nodule is a lump in the thyroid gland. When a thyroid nodule is found, it will be checked to see if it is benign (not cancer) or malignant (cancer). Your health care practitioner may use an ultrasound exam to examine the nodule. Nodules may be further examined by a procedure known as [fine-needle aspiration](#) or [biopsy](#).

If no cancer cells are found, your health care practitioner may prescribe medication to decrease the size of your nodule or suggest surgery to remove it. If cancer cells are found, further treatment will be needed. Thyroid cancer usually can be treated with success.

Can I be treated for thyroid disease if I am pregnant?

Yes, it is important to be treated if you have thyroid disease when you are pregnant. Untreated thyroid disease can pose serious risks to a woman and her [fetus](#) during pregnancy. With treatment, most pregnant women with thyroid disease can have healthy babies.

What is postpartum thyroiditis?

Some women may not have thyroid problems during pregnancy, but develop problems after childbirth. This condition is called postpartum thyroiditis. It often is a short-term problem and hormone levels quickly return to normal.

Glossary

Autoimmune Disorder: A condition in which the body attacks its own tissues.

Biopsy: A minor surgical procedure to remove a small piece of tissue. This tissue is examined under a microscope in a laboratory.

Diabetes Mellitus: A condition in which the levels of sugar in the blood are too high.

Fetus: The stage of human development beyond 8 completed weeks after fertilization.

Fine-Needle Aspiration: A procedure to get a small amount of tissue using a needle and syringe. The tissue is examined under a microscope to look for cancer cells.

Goiter: An enlarged thyroid gland that causes a lump in the neck.

Hyperthyroidism: A condition in which the thyroid gland makes too much thyroid hormone.

Hypothyroidism: A condition in which the thyroid gland makes too little thyroid hormone.

Pituitary Gland: A gland located near the brain that controls growth and other changes in the body.

Thyroid-Stimulating Hormone (TSH): A hormone made by the pituitary gland that encourages the thyroid gland to make and release more thyroid hormone.

Ultrasound Exam: A test in which sound waves are used to examine inner parts of the body. During pregnancy, ultrasound can be used to check the fetus.

If you have further questions, contact your ob-gyn.

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