

Thyroid Disease

Your thyroid is a small gland found at the base of your neck. Your thyroid makes thyroid hormone. Thyroid hormone controls many activities in your body, including how fast you burn calories and how fast your heart beats. Diseases of the thyroid cause it to make either too much or too little of the hormone. Women are more likely than men to have thyroid diseases, especially right after pregnancy and after menopause.

Q: How do thyroid problems affect women?

A: In women, thyroid diseases can cause:

- **Problems with your menstrual period.** Your thyroid helps control your menstrual cycle. Too much or too little thyroid hormone can make your periods very light, heavy, or irregular. Thyroid disease also can cause your periods to stop for several months or longer, a condition called amenorrhea. If your body's immune system causes thyroid disease, other glands, including your ovaries, may be involved. This can lead to early menopause (before age 40).
- **Problems getting pregnant.** When thyroid disease affects the menstrual cycle, it also affects ovulation. This can make it harder for you to get pregnant.
- **Problems during pregnancy.** Thyroid disease not treated with medicine can cause health problems for the mother, including premature delivery (before 39 weeks of pregnancy), preeclampsia, or miscarriage. Untreated thyroid disease can also cause health problems for the baby, including heart failure or problems with growth and brain development.

Q: What kinds of thyroid disease affect women?

A: Thyroid diseases that affect women more than men include:

- **Hypothyroidism.** Hypothyroidism, or underactive thyroid, is when your thyroid does not make enough thyroid hormones. Symptoms can include feeling cold more easily, constipation, muscle weakness, weight gain, joint or muscle pain, feeling sad or depressed, feeling very tired, dry skin, thinning hair, sweating less than usual, a puffy face, hoarse voice, and more menstrual bleeding than usual. Hypothyroidism is treated with medicine that gives your body the thyroid hormone it needs to work normally.
- **Hyperthyroidism.** Hyperthyroidism, or overactive thyroid, causes your thyroid to make more thyroid hormone than your body needs. Symptoms can include weight loss, eating more than usual, rapid heartbeat, feeling nervous or anxious, irritability, trouble sleeping, trembling hands, increased sweating, feeling hot more easily, muscle weakness, diarrhea or more bowel movements than normal, and fewer and lighter menstrual periods than usual. Hyperthyroidism is treated with medicine, radioiodine therapy, or surgery to remove all or part of the thyroid.
- **Thyroiditis.** Thyroiditis is inflammation of the thyroid. It happens when your immune system attacks your thyroid. A common type of thyroiditis is postpartum thyroiditis. Postpartum thyroiditis may be treated with medicine. Thyroiditis can cause symptoms of either hyperthyroidism or hypothyroidism.
- **Goiter.** A goiter is an unusually enlarged thyroid gland. Usually, the only symptom of a goiter is a

swelling in your neck. But a very large goiter can cause a tight feeling in your throat, coughing, or problems swallowing or breathing. Medicine may help the goiter shrink back to near normal size.

- **Thyroid nodules.** A thyroid nodule is a swelling in one section of the thyroid gland. Most thyroid nodules do not cause symptoms and are not cancerous. But some thyroid nodules make too much thyroid hormone, causing hyperthyroidism. Sometimes, nodules grow so big that they cause problems with swallowing or breathing.

Treatment includes watchful waiting, surgery, or radioiodine therapy.

- **Thyroid cancer.** Most people with thyroid cancer have a thyroid nodule that does not cause any symptoms. If you do have symptoms, you may have swelling or a lump in the neck, problems swallowing, or a hoarse voice. Thyroid cancer is most often treated with surgery to remove the whole thyroid gland.

For more information...

For more information on thyroid disease, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

National Cancer Institute, NIH, HHS

800-422-6237 • www.cancer.gov

National Endocrine and Metabolic Diseases Information Service, NIDDK, NIH, HHS

888-828-0904 • www.niddk.nih.gov/

American Thyroid Association

www.thyroid.org

The Hormone Health Network

800-467-6663 • www.hormone.org

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