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Thyroid Health

About 20 million Americans suffer from thyroid disease, and approximately 13 million more are currently undiagnosed.

About the Thyroid

The thyroid gland is a small, butterfly-shaped gland located at the base of the neck, just below the Adam's apple and right above the collarbone, surrounding the windpipe. The thyroid helps control the function of many of the body's organs, including the heart, brain, liver, kidneys and skin, but it mostly helps to set the metabolism.

The two types of thyroid disease are hyperthyroidism and hypothyroidism.

Hyperthyroidism

This disease refers to an overactive thyroid gland, which produces too much thyroid hormone. Symptoms include the following:

- Goiters
- Enlarged thyroid
- Rapid heart rate
- Nervous, anxious or irritable behavior
- Trembling hands
- Unexplained weight loss
- Heat intolerance
- Increased sweating
- Hair loss
- Diarrhea
- Sleeplessness
- Fertility issues

Hypothyroidism

Hypothyroidism occurs when the thyroid gland produces less than the normal amount of thyroid hormone, resulting in the decrease of many bodily functions. When the metabolism slows due to hypothyroidism, the following may occur:

- Fatigue
- Unexplained weight gain
- Dry skin and hair
- Difficulty concentrating
- Increased cholesterol
- Intolerance to cold
- Constipation

Risk Factors

Risk factors for thyroid disease include:

- Being female—Women are five to eight times more likely to suffer from a thyroid disorder than men are.
- Age—Thyroid problems are very common in patients over 60, and the risk increases with age.
- A family history—If the disease runs in the family, testing every five years after age 35 is recommended.

- Pregnancy—Thyroid conditions can arise after giving birth.

Treatment

Treatment for hyperthyroidism usually includes prescription drugs, radioactive iodine therapy and/or surgery. Hypothyroidism tends to be treated most effectively with a prescription thyroid replacement hormone.

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