

Your Thyroid I.O.

Understanding Thyroid Disease

by Katharine Swan

Have you ever wondered why salt often has iodine in it? It's a little known fact that salt manufacturers started adding iodine to salt because iodine deficiencies were causing many people to develop thyroid problems. This piece of trivia is only the tip of the iceberg of ignorance: although the thyroid is vital to the proper operation of the body's metabolism, many people don't even know what it does, let alone the symptoms of thyroid problems.

The thyroid gland, located in the throat, controls the body's metabolism with the help of the brain's pituitary gland. The thyroid produces hormones, T3 and T4, which dictate how quickly the body uses energy. When triggered by the pituitary gland, the thyroid releases the hormones into the blood stream.

Thyroid disease affects the amount of hormone the gland produces. A problematic thyroid can swing one of two ways: either it becomes hyperactive and produces too much hormone, causing increased metabolism, or it produces too little, causing decreased metabolism. A hyperthyroid condition causes symptoms such as unexplained weight loss, irritability, restlessness, problems sleeping, and loss of menstrual periods. The more common condition is hypothyroidism, or an underactive thyroid; symptoms include weight gain, excessive menstruation, changes in skin and hair, a tendency to get cold easily, and abnormally low energy levels.

Although thyroid disease can be caused by dietary or environmental factors, such as iodine, it is usually an autoimmune disease,

meaning that the body's own immune system attacks the cells of the thyroid, effecting the rate of insulin production. Autoimmune diseases are genetic and can manifest themselves in any form: if you have one or more cases of autoimmune disease in your family history, you could eventually be diagnosed with any one of them yourself, including thyroid disease, type 1 diabetes, and rheumatoid arthritis.

The health risks and symptoms of thyroid disease may be reduced with proper treatment, particularly if the condition is caught early on. Nevertheless, thyroid disease in women is often misdiagnosed as depression or other illnesses. Therefore, it is important to actively pursue preventative health care. No matter how inconvenient it may be, attend your annual physical, and insist that your blood panel include a thyroid test, which measures the levels of hormones and immune antibodies in the blood. Know your family history, and share any pertinent information with your doctor. When it comes to your thyroid, knowledge ensures good health care. ■

