

- Glands

The underactive thyroid

Don't take this butterfly-shaped gland for granted

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Located at the front of the neck, just right under the voice box, is a butterfly-shaped gland called the thyroid. Seemingly less important as compared to other body organs and glands due to its small size, this hormone gland is in fact vital to so many body processes.

The thyroid gland plays a huge role in metabolism and weight management, growth and development, regulation of body temperature. It also affects how fast one's heart beats, concentration, and reflexes.

The thyroid gland produces three hormones: Triiodothyronine (T₃), Tetraiodothyronine (T₄), and Calcitonin. The T₃ is considered the active form of thyroid hormone while T₄ is the inactive form. Calcitonin regulates calcium and bone metabolism. These hormones are produced depending on the body's needs. Sometimes we need less and there are certain conditions when we need more. For instance, during pregnancy when more energy is required, the thyroid gland produces more hormones. If the body is also exposed to a colder climate, more hormones are needed to increase energy production, generate heat, and stabilize the body temperature.

But what happens when the thyroid gland refuses to do its job right? You end up with a sluggish and underactive thyroid, which is a condition that is medically referred to as hypothyroidism. This condition does not occur overnight. It gradually develops over a period of time and the symptoms may differ depending on the severity of the hormone deficiency.

Are you curious to know if your thyroid is underactive? Watch out for the following signs and symptoms:

- Unexplained weight gain or difficulty losing weight despite proper diet and exercise.
- Cold feet and hands
- Feeling cold even when others aren't cold
- Feeling exhausted or fatigued more than usual
- Having high blood cholesterol level
- Having low blood pressure or slow pulse (normal pulse rate is 60 to 100 beats per minute)
- Dry and falling hair
- Dry, scaly, itchy skin
- Dry and brittle nails
- Experiencing aches and pains, joint stiffness, and tingling sensation
- Constipation or having less than one bowel movement daily
- Feeling depressed, restless, moody, and sad
- Poor concentration and memory
- Low sex drive
- Dry, gritty eyes
- Light sensitivity
- Puffiness and swelling, especially around the eyes, face, hands, and feet
- Irregular menstrual cycle, heavier than normal
- Hoarseness

Some of the signs and symptoms may seem harmless right? After all, there's lotion for dry skin and an extra coat will do when you're feeling cold. When you consider, however, the massive impact of the thyroid function on the entire body, as evidenced by the number of symptoms that could arise, having an underactive thyroid shouldn't be taken lightly.

If you have been experiencing any of these symptoms, consult an endocrinologist for proper assessment and management. Do not wait until medical complications arise after years of neglecting the subtle signs of hypothyroidism.

To ensure that your thyroid gland is healthy, here are some lifestyle tips that promote optimum thyroid function.

Avoid very low-calorie and very low carbohydrate diets. These eating patterns prevent the conversion of the inactive T₄ to the active T₃ hormone. Instead, choose carbohydrates from fruits, vegetables, and whole grains like brown rice, quinoa, etc.

Be physically active throughout the day and engage in moderate exercise. Do not overdo it because too much intense exercise can be detrimental to an underactive thyroid.

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Manage stress and get adequate sleep. This will keep the stress hormones at bay and will not wreak havoc with the production of thyroid hormones.

Get 10 to 20 minutes of sun exposure daily. Or consult your registered nutritionist dietitian regarding vitamin D supplementation. This sunshine vitamin promotes the proper production of thyroid hormones.

More important, eat a wide variety of vegetables and fruits, including some seafood, nuts, and seeds, to get the nutrients (iron, iodine, zinc, selenium, vitamins C and A) that will keep your thyroid healthy and happy.