- Glands



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5 myths about THYROID HEALTH

It's true that this butterfly-shaped gland in your neck keeps your metabolism on course, but it's not to blame every time things go south.

MYTH #1

If you have unexplained weight gain and fatigue, it's most likely a thyroid problem.

THE TRUTH While these symptoms can point to a thyroid issue, "weight gain and fatigue can result from other factors such as diet, lifestyle, stress and poor sleep," says associate professor of medicine Dr Mihail Zilbermint. The thyroid releases hormones that help regulate many bodily functions, and when it puts out too much of them, that's known as hyperthyroidism. When it secretes too little (hypothyroidism), you may gain weight and feel fatigued. It's a good idea to ask your doctor for a thorough evaluation, advises Dr Zilbermint, especially if you've noticed a heart rate shift, unexplained weight changes, difficulty sleeping or staying awake, sensitivity to cold or heat, jitteriness or anxiety, depression, irritability or significant shifts in your menstrual cycle.

MYTH #2

Neck lumps are typically thyroid cancer.

THE TRUTH "Most of these lumps are benign," says Dr Theodore C. Friedman, a professor of internal medicine. In fact, thyroid nodules are far more common than most people realise, occurring in up to 65 per cent of people, and are cancerous only around 10 per cent of the time. Also, neck lumps aren't always related to the thyroid – they can be caused by swollen lymph nodes or cysts, which often go away on their own. Still, if you notice a lump that's not going away, talk to your doctor – thyroid cancer, even if it is that, is highly treatable.

MYTH #3

People who have hyperthyroidism are lucky because they can eat whatever they want.

THE TRUTH Any envy is misplaced. While those with hyperthyroidism may not gain weight easily or at all, the condition can cause serious heart problems, including stroke and heart failure, when left untreated. And even if an overactive thyroid speeds up their metabolism, no one gets a free pass to eat whatever they want. "A faster metabolism can lead to weight loss and increased hunger, but it's still essential to maintain a balanced diet, as eating unhealthy foods can lead to other problems such as nutrient deficiencies and heart disease," says Dr Zilbermint. Hyperthyroidism should be treated – and once it is, "bad eating habits may remain, so it's always best to stick to a healthy lifestyle to ensure overall wellbeing," he adds.

MYTH #4

Those with hypothyroidism are unable to lose weight.

THE TRUTH They can! "With proper medication, a balanced diet and regular exercise, people with hypothyroidism can lose weight," says Dr Zilbermint. An underactive thyroid can generally add between two to five kilograms to a person's weight, often due to fluid retention. But medication can help return thyroid levels to normal range, supporting their efforts to get back to their previous weight. Once hypothyroidism has been treated and thyroid levels are normal, the ability to gain or lose weight is the same as in patients who do not have thyroid problems. Which is to say that while losing weight is never easy, it's not impossible.

MYTH #5

Supplements are as good as medication for treating thyroid issues.

THE TRUTH Self-treatment isn't the way to go. Instead, stick to the medication your doctor prescribes. For hypothyroidism, that's usually levothyroxine, which mimics the hormones your body should make, essentially replacing what your thyroid isn't producing. For hyperthyroidism, the most common meds contain carbimazole, which helps slow down the overproduction of thyroid hormones. Keep in mind that many supposedly thyroid-aiding supplements contain iodine, which can cause problems. Typically, the iodine from your diet should be enough to support thyroid function, and too much can make autoimmune disorders like Hashimoto's disease (which can cause hypothyroidism) worse. Always tell your doctor about any supplements you're taking for any reason. P

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