

Thyroid dysfunction and aging

The thyroid is a butterfly-shaped gland that sits at the base of the neck, in front of the windpipe. It is the 'master controller' of metabolism.¹ Problems with our thyroid become very common as we get older² and elderly women are particularly vulnerable.



What are thyroid dysfunctions?

If your thyroid is underactive it produces too little thyroid hormone, resulting in a condition called **hypothyroidism**. People with hypothyroidism use energy more slowly and their metabolism also slows down.³ However, if your thyroid is overactive the gland releases too much thyroid hormone into the bloodstream, this results in a condition called hyperthyroidism which speeds up metabolism.⁴ Hypothyroidism is more common than hyperthyroidism throughout our lives.

Hypothyroidism

The signs and symptoms of hypothyroidism are similar to other common medical problems and the signs of ageing, so the condition can be overlooked. Symptoms may develop over a long period of time and go unnoticed.

Key changes in your body to look out for include:^{3,5,6}

- Fatigue, drowsiness and / or weakness
- Cold intolerance (not being able to tolerate the cold like those around you)
- Impaired memory
- Weight gain or increased difficulty losing weight (despite sensible diet and exercise)
- Depression
- Constipation
- Joint or muscle pain
- Thin and brittle hair or fingernails and/or dry flaky skin

We need to be aware of the signs of hypothyroidism as even mild cases where patients may have few or vague symptoms (medically known as subclinical hypothyroidism)⁷ can, if untreated, lead to more serious disease. These symptoms can include a heart rate so slow that it can cause patients to slip into a coma⁸, high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol levels (significant risk factors of heart disease)⁸ and Alzheimer's disease (an increase risk in women).⁹

Treatment for hypothyroidism remains the same throughout our life. The aim is to replace the missing thyroid hormone in the body. Elderly patients will often start on lower doses of levothyroxine, a synthetically produced thyroid hormone, to enable their body to adjust to the changing hormone levels.² The

dose is increased in steps every four to six weeks until tests show that their thyroid hormone levels are back to normal.²

Hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism is not as common as hypothyroidism. The key symptoms to look out for include:^{4,10}

- Weight loss even when eating normally
- Anxiety and irritability
- Very fast heart rate (often more than 100 beats per minute)
- Prominent, staring eyes
- Trembling hands
- Feeling very weak
- Hair loss
- Frequent bowel movements
- Fast growing fingernails
- Thin and very smooth skin
- Sweating more than usual
- Abnormal menstrual periods

Untreated hyperthyroidism may lead to cardiac arrhythmia (an irregular rate of muscle contractions in the heart) through to heart attacks.¹⁰ Additionally, if you are a woman who has gone through the menopause, please be aware that hyperthyroidism increases your risk of osteoporosis (a loss of bone mass) and potentially fatal fractures.¹⁰

At every age, the aim of hyperthyroidism treatment is to reduce the thyroid hormone in the body, but the ways to achieve this have to be adapted in the elderly. Treatment includes antithyroid drugs and radioactive iodine therapy to block thyroid hormone production. However, surgical removal of the thyroid may often be

considered too risky.² Therapy is closely monitored as changing levels of thyroid hormone affect the heart.²

Worryingly, thyroid dysfunctions are often missed later in life as the symptoms are less visible than in younger sufferers. Also the symptoms can be dismissed as 'just part of ageing',² thereby leaving people at risk of not getting the essential support and treatment they need.

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For further information

If you would like any further information on thyroid dysfunction, please visit the following websites: www.thyroidweek.com www.thyroid-fed.org

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