

# Detecting and treating thyroid dysfunction

Up to 300 million people worldwide experience problems with their thyroid,<sup>1</sup> although over half are presumed to be unaware of their condition.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

## 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>



## Detecting thyroid dysfunctions

Many patients remain undiagnosed with thyroid problems and suffer for a long time as their symptoms have been confused with other conditions, such as depression, pregnancy or the menopause. However, it is important to remember that thyroid dysfunction can be confirmed by your doctor through a simple blood test to check the level of thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH) and thyroid hormones in your blood.<sup>4</sup>

Treatment for thyroid dysfunction is straight forward, well-established and **highly effective**.



## Hypothyroidism treatment

As there is no cure for hypothyroidism, the aim of treatment is to replace the missing thyroid hormone in the body. Taken daily, levothyroxine, which is synthetically produced thyroid hormone, should enable patients to live a symptom free life.<sup>4</sup> This medication has been used very successfully since the 1950s.<sup>6</sup> However, it is important to remember that treatment is a lifelong commitment and medication has to be taken every day even when symptoms are under control.<sup>4</sup>

Once your correct dose of levothyroxine is found by you and your doctor, you will probably have a check up just once or twice a year. However, it is advisable to see your doctor more frequently if any changes in your condition occur.

### **Hyperthyroidism treatment**

The treatment of hyperthyroidism is more complex. You can have surgery to remove part or all of the thyroid gland and use radioactive iodine therapy to destroy cells in the thyroid gland. Both treatments are likely to result in your thyroid becoming underactive. Alternatively doctors can block the thyroid hormone production with antithyroid drugs.<sup>5</sup> This medication can be very effective, but there may be side effects.

If you are concerned about thyroid dysfunction please speak to your doctor to find out more information. Your doctor will also be able to explain the advantages and disadvantages of treatments discussed above.

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4. American Thyroid Association. ATA Hypothyroidism Booklet. Falls Church, VA 2003.
5. American Thyroid Association. Hyperthyroidism. 2005 [http://www.thyroid.org/patients/brochures/Hyper\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.thyroid.org/patients/brochures/Hyper_brochure.pdf) Accessed March 2009.
6. FDA Approves Unithroid (Levothyroxine), Thyroid Hormone Replacement, For Use In Adults And Children. Doctor's Guide. <http://www.pslgroup.com/dg/1ddfce.htm> Accessed March 2009.

### **For further information**

If you would like any further information on thyroid dysfunction, please visit the following websites: [www.thyroidweek.com](http://www.thyroidweek.com)

[www.thyroid-fed.org](http://www.thyroid-fed.org)

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