

Supporting Thyroid Function

by Shannon Mooney

The primary function of the thyroid is to regulate the metabolic function of the body. The secretion of two hormones from the thyroid gland control how quickly the body burns calories and uses energy. When the thyroid gland produces too much of the thyroid hormones an imbalance occurs known as hyperthyroidism resulting in an overactive state. When the thyroid produces too little of the thyroid hormones, hypothyroidism occurs and the body's metabolism slows down. Since the thyroid hormones regulate metabolism in every cell of the body, an imbalance in the hormones will virtually affect all functions of the body leading to a wide range of symptoms.

In the disorder of hyperthyroidism, all the body's systems speed up. Many common symptoms are:

- nervousness
- irritability
- sensitivity to heat
- weight loss or fluctuating weight
- increased perspiration
- insomnia
- fatigue
- increased frequency of bowel movements
- goiter

There can be many causes of hyperthyroidism. Temporary hyperthyroidism is a situation that can be caused by an infection or inflammation or even prescription drugs. The most common form of this disorder is known as Graves' disease. In Ayurveda, hyperthyroidism is primarily a pitta-vata type disorder.

Hyperthyroidism is not as common as hypothyroidism. Both disorders affect women more than men. Current medical information estimates the rate of hypothyroidism in the general adult population to be somewhere around twenty-five percent, based on medical history, physical examination, basal body temperature and blood thyroid levels.

Hypothyroidism refers to low function of the thyroid gland, typically a kapha-type disorder. Symptoms include:

- fatigue
- sensitivity to cold
- slow heart rate
- moderate weight gain
- menstrual and fertility problems
- depression
- muscle weakness

- muscle cramps and spasms due to calcium loss
- goiter
- loss of libido

Both hyperthyroidism and hypothyroidism may be caused by an abnormal immune response. In this situation, the immune system produces antibodies that bind to the thyroid tissue and disrupt hormone production. Hashimoto's disease is a condition most commonly linked to an underactive thyroid. In this disorder, the body has an auto-immune response, creating an intolerance to the thyroid hormone. Hashimoto's can often cause an enlarging of the thyroid gland known as a goiter.

Iodine deficiency leads to hypothyroidism and the development of a goiter. The cases of iodine deficiency in the United States and other developed countries are now quite rare due to the addition of iodine to table salt.

Goiters may also be the result of ingesting excessive amounts of certain raw foods that have been found to be goitrogens, a term used for foods that block iodine utilization in the body. Some examples of these foods are cabbage, turnips, cassava root, soybeans, peanuts and pine nuts.

Other factors that increase the risk of developing hypothyroidism are:

- genetic predisposition
- if you have been diagnosed with celiac's disease (intolerance to gluten)
- if you are a smoker or used to smoke
- women undergoing a change in menstrual cycle (menopausal, post-partum)

There is still controversy over the manner of diagnosing a thyroid problem. Blood tests are not sensitive enough to diagnose milder cases of hypothyroidism. Mild hypothyroidism is the most common of thyroid disorders and can be an underlying factor in a large number of diseases. The basal body temperature measures your body's metabolic rate. It is probably one of the most accurate tools for diagnosis and can be done easily by measuring and recording your temperature, taken preferably at the same time each day, for at least three days in a row. Because temperatures vary during a woman's cycle, it is best for women to wait until after their cycle is over to begin recording with accuracy. A normal temperature should be in the range between 97.6 and 98.2. A low temperature may be indicative of hypothyroidism. If a thyroid problem is suspected, it is best to visit an endocrinologist for examination and diagnosis, bringing your recorded temperatures with you.

Ayurveda can work best as a complementary therapy to promote optimal health through diet, herbs, yoga, meditation and pranayama. Close examination of a person's diet can help eliminate other causative factors or allergens which may be contributing to thyroid problems. An Ayurvedic consultant can help to better tailor your diet to your constitution and condition. A general recommendation for people with thyroid problems is to avoid the goitrogenic foods mentioned previously and supply the body with whole, natural foods such as fruits, vegetables,

grains, beans, seeds, and nuts. Choose a health-promoting diet rich in nutrients and avoid substances that are detrimental to health such as refined sugars, processed foods, saturated fats and alcohol.

Strengthening digestion with Ayurvedic herbs can help to improve the functioning of the body and promote a healthy thyroid. Trikatu can be especially helpful when there is a feeling of heaviness, excess weight and loss of appetite.

Exercise can also improve thyroid function. It can be difficult to find the energy to exercise when feeling fatigued but exercise is particularly important in the treatment of hypothyroidism. Exercise may be one of the most powerful natural therapies to alleviate depression, one common symptom of hypothyroidism. People who exercise regularly have higher self-esteem and are generally happier than those who do not. Even gentle exercise such as walking, swimming, or yoga stimulates thyroid gland secretion and increases tissue sensitivity to thyroid hormones. Yoga can be a tremendous healing therapy for those suffering from hypothyroidism. The practice of yoga brings energy and flexibility to the body, reduces stiffness of muscles and joints, and calms the mind. Asanas that target the site of the thyroid will be most beneficial such as Camel, Bow, Upward Facing Dog and Cobra. These poses all tone and stimulate the thyroid, parathyroid and other endocrine glands.

Meditation can help to improve the mental state of people suffering from thyroid problems. Clearing the mind is beneficial to everyone, particularly those struggling with chronic illness where stress plays a role. Meditating for a short time each day can help improve memory and concentration, two mental functions that can be disturbed by low thyroid function.

Pranayama or exercising the breath is a valuable tool for hypothyroid individuals. One of the most powerful ways to decrease stress and increase energy in the body is by breathing with the diaphragm. Taking deep breaths into the belly at a slow, rhythmic rate helps to encourage the relaxation response. Relaxation can reduce the levels of cortisol, a stress hormone produced by the adrenal glands. Higher levels of cortisol may result in depression and impair thyroid function. Pranayama, like exercise, also increases the sensitivity of tissues to thyroid hormones. Practicing pranayama regularly will improve oxygen absorption by the body, particularly in the heart and lungs and also helps to elevate the mood. Here is a simple practice to try either comfortably seated or lying on the floor:

- Place one hand on your belly near your naval and the other hand on your chest.
- Breathe normally through your nose, first noticing if you are breathing more air into your belly or your chest.
- Begin inhaling while counting silently to four.
- Pause for one second, then slowly exhale to the count of four.
- Continue for five to ten breaths.
- Remove your hands, breathe normally again, notice the sensation of relaxation in the body.