

# Hyperthyroidism

## WHAT IS THE THYROID GLAND?

The thyroid gland is a butterfly-shaped endocrine gland that is normally located in the lower front of the neck. The thyroid's job is to make thyroid hormones, which are secreted into the blood and then carried to every tissue in the body. Thyroid hormone helps the body use energy, stay warm and keep the brain, heart, muscles, and other organs working as they should.

## WHAT IS HYPERTHYROIDISM?

The term hyperthyroidism refers to any condition in which there is too much thyroid hormone produced in the body. In other words, the thyroid gland is overactive. Another term that you might hear for this problem is thyrotoxicosis, which refers to high thyroid hormone levels in the blood stream, irrespective of their source.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF HYPERTHYROIDISM?

Thyroid hormone plays a significant role in the pace of many processes in the body. These processes are called your metabolism. If there is too much thyroid hormone, every function of the body tends to speed up. It is not surprising then that some of the symptoms of hyperthyroidism are nervousness, irritability, increased sweating, heart racing, hand tremors, anxiety, difficulty sleeping, thinning of your skin, fine brittle hair and weakness in your muscles—especially in the upper arms and thighs. You may have more frequent bowel movements, but diarrhea is uncommon. You may lose weight despite a good appetite and, for women, menstrual flow may lighten and menstrual periods may occur less often. Since hyperthyroidism increases your metabolism, many individuals initially have a lot of energy. However, as the hyperthyroidism continues, the body tends to break down, so being tired is very common.

Hyperthyroidism usually begins slowly but in some young patients these changes can be very abrupt. At first, the symptoms may be mistaken for simple nervousness due to stress. If you have been trying to lose weight by dieting, you may be pleased with your success until the hyperthyroidism, which has quickened the weight loss, causes other problems.

In *Graves' Disease* (also known as *Basedow's Disease*), which is the most common form of hyperthyroidism, the eyes may look enlarged because the upper lids are elevated. Sometimes, one or both eyes may bulge. Some patients have swelling of the front of the neck from an enlarged thyroid gland (a goiter).

## WHAT CAUSES HYPERTHYROIDISM?

The most common cause (in more than 70% of people) is overproduction of thyroid hormone by the entire thyroid gland. This condition is also known as Graves' disease (see the *Graves' Disease brochure* for details). Graves' disease is caused by antibodies in the blood that turn on the thyroid and cause it to grow and secrete too much thyroid hormone. This type of hyperthyroidism tends to run in families and it occurs more often in young women. Little is known about why specific individuals get this disease. Another type of hyperthyroidism is characterized by one or more nodules or lumps in the thyroid that may gradually grow and increase their activity so that the total output of thyroid hormone into the blood is greater than normal. This condition is known as toxic nodular or multinodular goiter. Also, people may temporarily have symptoms of hyperthyroidism if they have a condition called thyroiditis. This condition is caused by a problem with the immune system or a viral infection that causes the gland to leak stored thyroid hormone. The same symptoms can also be caused by taking too much thyroid hormone in tablet form. In these last two forms, there is excess thyroid hormone but the thyroid is not overactive.

## HOW IS HYPERTHYROIDISM DIAGNOSED?

If your physician suspects that you have hyperthyroidism, diagnosis is usually a simple matter. A physical examination usually detects an enlarged thyroid gland and a rapid pulse. The physician will also look for moist, smooth skin and a tremor of your fingers. Your reflexes are likely to be fast, and your eyes may have some abnormalities if you have Graves' disease.



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The diagnosis of hyperthyroidism will be confirmed by laboratory tests that measure the amount of thyroid hormones—thyroxine (T4) and triiodothyronine (T3)—and thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) in your blood. A high level of thyroid hormone in the blood plus a low level of TSH is common with an overactive thyroid gland. If blood tests show that your thyroid is overactive, your doctor may want to measure levels of thyrotropin receptor antibodies (TRAbs), which when elevated confirm the diagnosis of Graves disease. Your doctor may also want to obtain a picture of your thyroid (a thyroid scan). The scan will find out if your entire thyroid gland is overactive or whether you have a toxic nodular goiter or thyroiditis (thyroid inflammation). A test that measures the ability of the gland to collect iodine (a thyroid uptake) may be done at the same time.

## HOW IS HYPERTHYROIDISM TREATED?

No single treatment is best for all patients with hyperthyroidism. The appropriate choice of treatment will be influenced by your age, the type of hyperthyroidism that you have, the severity of your hyperthyroidism, other medical conditions that may be affecting your health, and your own preference. It may be a good idea to consult with an endocrinologist who is experienced in the treatment of hyperthyroid patients. If you are unconvinced or unclear about any thyroid treatment plan, a second opinion is a good idea.

**Antithyroid Drugs:** Drugs known as antithyroid agents—methimazole (Tapazole®) or in rare instances propylthiouracil (PTU)—may be prescribed if your doctor chooses to treat the hyperthyroidism by blocking the thyroid gland's ability to make new thyroid hormone. Methimazole is presently the preferred one due to less severe side-effects. These drugs work well to control the overactive thyroid, and do not cause permanent damage to the thyroid gland. In about 20% to 30% of patients with Graves' disease, treatment with antithyroid drugs for a period of 12 to 18 months will result in prolonged remission of the disease. For patients with toxic nodular or multinodular goiter, antithyroid drugs are sometimes used in preparation for either radioiodine treatment or surgery.

Antithyroid drugs cause allergic reactions in about 5% of patients who take them. Common minor reactions are red skin rashes, hives, and occasionally fever and joint pains. A rarer (occurring in 1 of 500 patients), but more serious side effect is a decrease in the number of white blood cells. Such a decrease can lower your resistance to infection. Very rarely, these white blood cells disappear completely, producing a condition known as agranulocytosis, a potentially fatal problem if a serious infection occurs. If you are taking one of these drugs and develop a fever or sore throat, you should stop the drug immediately and have a white blood cell count that day. Even if the drug has lowered your white blood cell count, the count will return to normal if the drug is stopped immediately. But if you continue to take one of these drugs in spite of a low white blood cell count, there is a risk of a more serious, even life-threatening infection. Liver damage is another very rare side effect. A very serious liver problem can occur with PTU use which is why this medication should not generally be prescribed. You should stop either methimazole or PTU and call your doctor if you develop yellow eyes, dark urine, severe fatigue, or abdominal pain.

**Radioactive Iodine:** Another way to treat hyperthyroidism is to damage or destroy the thyroid cells that make thyroid hormone. Because these cells need iodine to make thyroid hormone, they will take up any form of iodine in your bloodstream, whether it is radioactive or not. The radioactive iodine used in this treatment is administered by mouth, usually in a small capsule that is taken just once. Once swallowed, the radioactive iodine gets into your bloodstream and quickly is taken up by the overactive thyroid cells. The radioactive iodine that is not taken up by the thyroid cells disappears from the body within days over a period of several weeks to several months (during which time drug treatment may be used to control hyperthyroid symptoms), radioactive iodine destroys the cells that have taken it up. The result is that the thyroid or thyroid nodules shrink in size, and the level of thyroid hormone in the blood returns to normal. Sometimes patients will remain hyperthyroid, but usually to a lesser degree than before.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Further details on this and other thyroid-related topics are available in the patient thyroid information section on the American Thyroid Association® website at [www.thyroid.org](http://www.thyroid.org).

For information on thyroid patient support organizations, please visit the [Patient Support Links](http://www.thyroid.org) section on the ATA website at [www.thyroid.org](http://www.thyroid.org)





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For them, a second radioiodine treatment can be given if needed. More often, hypothyroidism (an underactive thyroid) occurs after a few months and lasts lifelong, requiring treatment. In fact, when patients have Graves' disease, a dose of radioactive iodine is chosen with the goal of making the patient hypothyroid so that the hyperthyroidism does not return in the future. Hypothyroidism can easily be treated with a thyroid hormone supplement taken once a day (see [Hypothyroidism brochure](#)).

Radioactive iodine has been used to treat patients for hyperthyroidism for over 60 years and has been shown to be generally safe. Importantly, there has been no clear increase in cancer in hyperthyroid patients that have been treated with radioactive iodine. As a result, in the United States more than 70% of adults who develop hyperthyroidism are treated with radioactive iodine. More and more children over the age of 5 are also being safely treated with radioiodine.

**Surgery:** Your hyperthyroidism can be permanently cured by surgical removal of all or most of your thyroid gland. This procedure is best performed by a surgeon who has experience in thyroid surgery. An operation could be risky unless your hyperthyroidism is first controlled by an antithyroid drug (see above) or a beta-blocking drug (see below), usually for some days before surgery, your surgeon may want you to take drops of nonradioactive iodine—either Lugol's iodine or supersaturated potassium iodide (SSKI). This extra iodine reduces the blood supply to the thyroid gland and thus makes the surgery easier and safer. Although any surgery is risky, major complications of thyroid surgery occur rarely in patients operated on by an experienced thyroid surgeon. These complications include damage to the parathyroid glands that are next to the thyroid and control your body's calcium levels (causing problems with low calcium levels) and damage to the nerves that control your vocal cords (causing you to have a hoarse voice).

After your thyroid gland is removed, the source of your hyperthyroidism is gone and you will become hypothyroid. As with hypothyroidism that develops after radioiodine treatment, your thyroid hormone levels can be restored to normal by treatment once a day with a thyroid hormone supplement.

**Beta-Blockers:** No matter which of these three methods of treatment are used for your hyperthyroidism, your physician may prescribe a class of drugs known as beta-blockers that block the action of thyroid hormone on your body. They usually make you feel better within hours to days, even though they do not change the high levels of thyroid hormone in your blood. These drugs may be extremely helpful in slowing down your heart rate and reducing the symptoms of palpitations, shakes, and nervousness until one of the other forms of treatment has a chance to take effect. Propranolol (Inderal®) was the first of these drugs to be developed. Some physicians now prefer related, but longer-acting beta-blocking drugs such as atenolol (Tenormin®), metoprolol (Lopressor®), nadolol (Corgard®), and Inderal-LA® because of their more convenient once- or twice-a-day dosage.

## OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS AT RISK

Because hyperthyroidism, especially Graves' disease, may run in families, examinations of the members of your family may reveal other individuals with thyroid problems.



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