

# Symptoms and consequences of thyroid dysfunction

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>1</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>2</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>3</sup>

Each person's experience of thyroid dysfunction is unique and not everyone will encounter all the symptoms associated with the condition.



## Watch out for...

The two thyroid dysfunctions (hypothyroidism and hyperthyroidism) are quite different conditions but in both cases, the thyroid gland can become larger than normal, so that it can be visible or felt under the skin at the front of the neck. Goitre is the medical term for an enlarged thyroid gland.<sup>4</sup>



## Hypothyroidism

The signs and symptoms of hypothyroidism are similar to other common medical problems, so the condition is often overlooked. Symptoms may develop over a long period of time and go unnoticed. Key changes in your body to look out for include:<sup>2, 5, 6, 7</sup>

- 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
- Abnormal menstrual periods and/or fertility problems
- Joint or muscle pain
- Thin and brittle hair or fingernails and/or dry flaky skin

People need to be aware of the signs of hypothyroidism as even mild cases where people may have few or vague symptoms (medically known as subclinical hypothyroidism)<sup>8</sup> can, if untreated, lead to more serious disease.

## Hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism is not as common as hypothyroidism. The key symptoms to look out for include:<sup>3,9</sup>

- 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

## Consequences of thyroid dysfunction

The physical symptoms of thyroid dysfunction are unpleasant and can affect self-esteem, work, home and family life. However, more worryingly is that left untreated they can have serious and potentially life-threatening complications.

Untreated **hypothyroidism** can lead to a heart rate so slow that it can cause patients to slip into a coma.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it is also associated with high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol levels (significant risk factors of heart disease),<sup>10</sup> infertility<sup>7</sup> and Alzheimer's disease (there is an increased risk in women).<sup>11</sup>

Untreated **hyperthyroidism** may lead to cardiac arrhythmia (an irregular rate of muscle contractions in the heart)<sup>9</sup> through to heart attacks. Additionally,

## 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)

in women who have gone through the menopause, hyperthyroidism increases the risk of osteoporosis (a loss of bone mass) and potentially fatal fractures.<sup>9</sup>

Effective treatment for thyroid dysfunction is available to reduce the risks of serious complications. Talk to your doctor to find out more information.

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