

Thyroid disease and children – What every parent should know

Did you know?

- Thyroid problems can have a major impact on both the physical and mental development of your child if left untreated or not treated appropriately.
- Effective treatments are available and acting early is essential to avoid long a issues.
- Thyroid problems tend to run in families, be watchful of your child's development if you suffer from thyroid problems yourself or any other autoimmune disorder.

What is the thyroid and what does it do?

The thyroid is a butterfly-shaped gland which sits at the base of the neck in front of the windpipe.² The thyroid controls metabolism and plays an important role in child growth and neuropsychological development and learning abilities.¹

When problems occur ...

Like adults, children most commonly suffer from either an underactive thyroid (**hypothyroidism**) where the body produces too little thyroid hormone slowing down metabolism, or an overactive thyroid (**hyperthyroidism**), where the body produces too much thyroid hormone causing metabolism to speed up.^{3,4}



What causes thyroid problems in children?

Children can be born without a properly working thyroid gland, or they may develop problems with the functioning of their thyroid as a result of any of the following: too little iodine in their diet, an autoimmune disease (such as Hashimoto's thyroiditis or Graves' disease) or injury to their thyroid gland.

What to look for?

It is vital that parents understand the signs and symptoms of the key thyroid problems to help ensure their children get the support and treatment they need.

The symptoms of an underactive thyroid in children can vary depending on their age, however they commonly include:^{5,6}

- Prolonged jaundice in babies
- Stunted bone /teeth growth
- Learning difficulties
- Delayed puberty

The common symptoms of an overactive thyroid in children include:⁵

- Changes in behaviour /school performance
- Sleeplessness
- Restlessness
- Irritability

Unrecognised thyroid problems can have a serious effect on a child's physical and mental development. However, early diagnosis is simple and will allow the child to benefit from early treatment. Please speak to your doctor if your child is experiencing any of the above symptoms and you are worried about their health.

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Help is at hand

Parents can be reassured that thyroid problems can be well treated, allowing children to live happy and healthy lives.

- An underactive thyroid (hypothyroidism) is treated by replacing a child's missing thyroid hormone with a medication. Levothyroxine, the mainstay of treatment in adults, is also recommended for use in children. However, the dose is tailored to match the specific weight and needs of the child.⁵
- In children with an overactive thyroid (hyperthyroidism) anti-thyroid medications can be used, however, in some cases, surgery may be a therapeutic option.⁵

Keeping a watchful eye

It is important throughout childhood that parents monitor their child's physical and mental development; seeking medical advice if they have any concerns. Thyroid disorders can run in families, so if you or close family members have experienced these problems, take extra care to watch for the signs in your own children.¹

If your child is diagnosed with a thyroid disorder it is important to ensure they remain healthy by keeping track of their treatment and thyroid hormone levels. Thyroid levels can be

checked by your doctor through a simple blood test every 3–6 months.¹ It is also recommended that you inform your child's school/nursery of their condition, so the organisation is aware of any special needs or medication requirements.

References

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6. Lee PA. The effects of manipulation of puberty on growth. *Horm Res*. 2003;60:60-7

For further information

If you would like any further information on thyroid problems, please visit the following websites:

www.thyroidweek.com www.thyroid-fed.org

The information in this factsheet is not intended as a substitute for informed medical advice. You must consult a suitable qualified healthcare professional on any problem or matter which is covered by any information in this factsheet before taking any action.

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