6 Ways to Live Well with Hypothyroidism

An underactive thyroid is manageable if you know what to do

by Jacob Teitelbaum, MD

If you've been diagnosed with hypothyroidism, you aren't alone. According to the National Institutes of Health, approximately 5 percent of Americans are living with the condition—and many experience symptoms such as fatigue, hair loss, lack of motivation, and weight gain on a daily basis. If these symptoms sound familiar, know that you aren't powerless. Adopting the following lifestyle changes can help you manage the disease and even thrive in the face of an underactive thyroid.

Get Tested

Most physicians rely on just one lab test (thyroid-stimulating hormone, or TSH) to assess thyroid function. The problem is, simply looking at TSH levels doesn't give you or your doctor the whole picture. This is because a normal TSH result merely means that you aren't in the highest or lowest 2.5 percent of the population. That's why relying solely on THS testing misses over 50 percent of people who need thyroid supplementation.

If you're symptomatic or you suspect a glitch in your thyroid function, ask your health-care provier for a comprehensive thyroid panel that measures TSH, total T4, free T4 and T3, reverse T3, and thyroid peroxidase antibody (TPO). This type of testing provides a complete picture of the state of your thyroid hormones as well as the antibodies that can undermine their function.

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Be Vigilant About Your Veggies

Loading up on a wide array of colorful vegetables is a good strategy for improving your overall health. But if you have hypothyroidism, there are some you'll want to avoid. Vegetables that are considered goitrogens can inhibit the uptake of iodine. These include cruciferous vegetables like broccoli, Brussels sprouts, and cabbage. And if you're taking levothyroxine (a synthetic version of thyroid hormone), steer clear of soy as it can interfere with the absorption of the drug.

Take a Pass on Ultra-Processed Food

Ultra-processed foods can set you up for weight gain. Plus, many of the ingredients they contain foster systemic inflammation. The worst offenders? Seed oils and sugar. It's also wise to avoid gluten if you've been diagnosed with Hashimoto's disease (an autoimmune form of hypothyroidism). In one 2019 study, Hashimoto patients who adopted a gluten-free diet had lower levels of TPO.

Exercise, but Don't Overdo It

Regular exercise can increase your energy levels, improve your mood and your sleep quality, and even boost your thyroid functions. In fact, participating in regular exercise for at least 30 minutes three times per week has been shown to bring TSH levels into a healthier range. On the flip side, not getting any physical activity can actually elevate your TSH levels according to a 2021 study published in *BMC Endocrine Disorders*.

Engaging in as little as 30 minutes of exercise most days also helps you maintain a healthy weight. That's

important since another report in the same journal found that carrying too much weight can worsen hypothyroidism by increasing TPO activity, especially in those with subclinical hypothyroidism.

Strive to get at least 150 minutes of aerobic and resistance exercise each week. If you lack motivation, consider hiring a trainer or committing to working out with friends. Just remember that if you have hypothyroidism, stick with moderate exercise. Going full "beast mode" can trigger fatigue and decrease iodine levels, negatively affecting your body's ability to convert T4 to T3.

Manage Stress

Chronic stress can increase the thyroid hormone resistance of your thyroid receptor cells. When you're under stress, your body also releases the hormone cortisol. Too much cortisol can interfere with thyroid hormone production, stimulating the thyroid to work harder to create sufficient amounts. There's also some evidence that stress in people with hypothyroidism can have a negative impact on memory. But taming your stress demons has been clinically shown to foster calm and lower TPO and TSH levels. Experiment with relaxation techniques like breathing exercises, guided imagery, meditation, progressive relaxation, or yoga to see what works for you.

Consider Supportive Supplements

Tweaking your daily habits can go a long way toward improving your symptoms and quality of life. But studies show that your thyroid will benefit even more if you give it the specific nutrients it needs.

Iodine. Your thyroid requires iodine to make both T4 and T3. When it doesn't get enough iodine, thyroid hormone production runs short, leading to symptoms. A 2023 pilot study published in the *Journal of Thyroid Research* found that 91.7 percent of hypothyroid patients had iodine deficiencies. While the RDA for this crucial nutrient is just 150 mcg per day, experts recommend between 6.25 and 12.5 mg daily. To get the most benefit from adding iodine to your care plan, look for a comprehensive supplement that delivers three different forms of iodine, including molecular iodine, sodium iodide, and potassium iodide. However, if you're currently taking levothyroxine, talk with your health-care provider before taking supplemental iodine.

L-tyrosine. This amino acid is an essential building block for thyroid-hormone production. Your body also needs it to create important neurotransmitters like dopamine. L-tyrosine is known for improving brain function and focus during times of stress.

Selenium. Although it's not directly involved in thyroid hormone production, selenium is crucial for converting T4 into T3. Selenium also provides powerful antioxidant protection to thyroid tissue, shielding it from free radical damage. What's more, a selenium deficiency increases the risk for Hashimoto's thyroiditis and other thyroid diseases.

Hypothyroidism isn't a one-size-fits-all disorder. It can often manifest differently in different people. Keeping a journal of your symptoms and how these lifestyle changes affect you can help you dial in on self-care measures that can support your thyroid and improve your overall health and quality of life. ■

Your Guide to Thyroid Testing

Getting a full thyroid panel is a smart move if you suspect your thyroid isn't up to par. But, deciphering the findings can be confusing. Here's a cheat sheet to help you out.

- ***TSH (Thyroid-Stimulating Hormone)*** evaluates your overall thyroid function. The current upper limit considered normal is 5.0 mU/L. However the American Association of Clinical Endocrinology recommends lowering the limit to 3.04 mU/L to help identify those with borderline (subclinical) hypothyroidism.
- ***Total Thyroxine (T4)*** is the total amount of T4 produced by the thyroid gland. Normal levels range from 5.0 to 12.0 µg/dL.
- ***Free Thyroxine (T4)*** measures the amount of T4 that's available to the cells and tissues. Normal levels range from 0.7 to 1.9 ng/dL.
- ***Total triiodothyronine (T3)*** reflects the total amount of T3 (the active form of the hormone). Normal total T3 levels range from 80 to 220 ng/dL.
- ***Free triiodothyronine (T3)*** is the amount of available T3. Normal levels range from 2.0 to 4.4 pg/mL.
- ***Reverse T3*** - Measures the non-functioning form of T3.
- ***Thyroid peroxidase antibody (TPO)*** are antibodies that can attack proteins involved in the production of thyroid hormones, rendering them dysfunctional. TPO levels over 35 IU/mL generally show thyroid antibody activity.

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