

How to Improve the Health of your Thyroid

with Diet and Lifestyle Modifications

Your thyroid is a small, butterfly-shaped gland located in your neck. This gland is responsible for several essential bodily functions, including regulating metabolism, mood, energy, heart rate, blood pressure, and body temperature. The thyroid regulates all of this by producing thyroid hormones. However, when the thyroid is under active (or produces too little hormones) regular function can suffer (i.e., weight fluctuation, fatigue, and depression). This is known as hypothyroidism.

Not only does the thyroid regulate how quickly our body burns calories and maintains our metabolism, it also controls the body's sensitivities to other hormones such as estradiol and cortisol. Basically, the thyroid is our metabolic thermostat. When it is low you feel sluggish, constipated, depressed, and foggy-brained. Your metabolism slows down and therefore it is nearly impossible to lose weight. When your thyroid is working properly, you feel energetic, think clearly and are upbeat. Thyroid conditions are among the most under- and misdiagnosed hormonal imbalances.

Thyroid disorders are more common in women affecting 20 per cent at some point on their life time. These disorders not only affect energy levels and weight issues but can also wreak havoc on the menstrual cycle and affect fertility.

Low thyroid may be caused by

Hashimoto's thyroiditis. An autoimmune thyroiditis that attacks the thyroid gland causing it to burn out

Goiter. A noncancerous enlargement of the thyroid gland which can be caused by iodine deficiency. Iodine has been added to table salt to combat this deficiency

Stress. Production of cortisol from the adrenal glands in response to stress can lower the production of thyroid hormone and block receptors

Endocrine disrupters. BPA found in plastic water bottles, flame retardants, etc. can slow thyroid function by blocking receptors

Genetics

Goitrogens. A compound that suppresses the thyroid by interfering with a cell's uptake of iodine. Found in soy, millet and certain vegetables such as broccoli and Brussels sprouts

Cancer treatment

Vitamin D deficiency. 80% of the population is deficient in vitamin D

Celiac disease and gluten sensitivity. Celiacs are more likely to have antibodies against the thyroid

Symptoms associated with low thyroid

Fatigue
Unexplained weight gain
Constipation
Poor memory
Menstrual irregularities
Depression

Start with diet and lifestyle changes

1. Nutrition

Many foods can both positively and negatively impact those with hypothyroidism as well as those with normally working thyroids. **Foods to AVOID include all processed foods.** Not surprisingly, processed foods are one of the worst things we could feed our body, especially when it comes to thyroid health. The manufacturers who make these products, don't have to use iodized salt. In fact, they "almost never" do.

Processed foods are so high in salt, that 75% of our dietary sodium intake comes from restaurant, pre-packaged, and processed fare. In fact, a lot of the time we don't even realize how much salt we're consuming when we eat these kinds of food. Always be wary of processed foods! The following nutrient-rich foods that impact thyroid health:

Seafood

Seafood is high in iodine, a mineral that is vital to an efficiently functioning thyroid. If you are deficient in iodine, your thyroid may swell and you can become lethargic, fatigued, depressed, and void of energy.

However, if you suffer from hyperthyroidism (when the gland makes too much thyroid hormone), a diet high in iodine can exacerbate the symptoms—including accelerated heart rate, heart palpitations, mood swings, tremors, and anxiety.

Soy

There has been a bit of **controversy** over soy—whether it has a good or bad effect on the thyroid. According to research from the Mayo Clinic, soy and soy products (i.e., soy milk and edamame) are believed to interfere with the body's ability to utilize synthetic thyroid hormone and produce thyroid hormones (if you are being treated for hypothyroidism). However, studies are still inconclusive.

Unless you are suffering from an iodine deficiency, soy is typically safe to eat and will not mess with your thyroid's ability to make thyroid hormones. Typically, an all or nothing mentality when it comes to food (total food group exclusion) tends to rob us of healthy, nutritious foods in or diets.

Leafy Greens

Magnesium is necessary for thyroid function (making thyroid hormone, in particular). If you are not getting adequate magnesium, you may suffer low energy, heartbeat irregularities, and muscle cramps and painful spasms. Leafy greens are a powerful source of magnesium and incorporating daily doses of spinach, Swiss Chard, and leafy lettuces into your diet will ensure a well-functioning thyroid gland.

Kale

Although kale is considered to be in the family of leafy greens, this green superfood is a high source of goitrogen, a substance that interferes with iodine uptake. It suppresses thyroid function—meaning it may hinder the thyroid's production of hormones necessary for regulating metabolism.

This means that goitrogen-rich foods (i.e., kale, broccoli, Brussel's sprouts) can be perfectly fine if you are getting adequate iodine in your diet. However, if you are suffering iodine deficiency (or suffer from hypothyroidism) eating foods like kale can cause metabolism and energy issues.

Organ Meats

Organ meats (i.e., liver, heart, and kidney) might not sound very appetizing. Organ meats are all high in a type of fatty acid, known as lipoic acid. Lipoic acid can cause thyroid function disturbances, such as lowering levels of thyroid hormone, and thus interfere with certain thyroid medications such as levothyroxine.

Salt

Since iodine is necessary for the proper functioning of the thyroid, iodine was added to salt in the 1920's to prevent goiter. All salt is sodium chloride and does not naturally contain iodine. If you are hyperthyroid and looking to minimize iodine in your diet, then you may use sea salt or Himalayan pink salt.

Gluten and Your Thyroid

About 1% of people suffer from Celiac disease which is an auto-immune responsive gluten allergy. Glutens are proteins present in barley, wheat, and rye. Unless you suffer from Celiac disease, your thyroid likely won't suffer any ill function. However, if you do have Celiac disease, consuming even a small amount of gluten can damage the lining of your small intestines and increase your risk of Hashimoto's disease (underactive thyroid) and Graves' disease (overactive thyroid).

Nuts

Nuts and seeds contain magnesium which, as noted above, is vital to healthy thyroid function. This means that if you're nuts for nuts—including almonds, cashews, Brazil nuts, and even pumpkin seeds—your thyroid will thank you. Brazil nuts give you double the thyroid-powering benefits of magnesium and selenium, a mineral that boosts the thyroid as well as the immune system.

Berries

Berries are one of the best fruits for us because they are full of antioxidants which are important to thyroid health. Look for dried wild bilberries, wild strawberries, blueberries, goji berries, sea buckthorn, and cranberries have among the highest antioxidant levels.

Eggs

Eggs are not only a great source of protein and fat, they are great for the thyroid because they contain a healthy dose of iodine and selenium. One large egg contains about 16% of the iodine and 20% of the selenium you need for the day, making them a thyroid superfood. And keep in mind, most of the nutrients are in the yolk.

Chicken and Beef

In addition to iodine, magnesium and selenium, our thyroid also needs zinc to help produce thyroid hormones. A diet that is lacking in zinc could lead to hypothyroidism. And if you develop hypothyroidism, you can also become deficient in zinc, since your thyroid hormones help absorb the mineral. Chicken and beef are the best sources, as one ounce of beef contains 3 milligrams and 3 ounces of dark chicken contains 2.4 milligrams.

Seaweed

Seaweed is another great source of iodine. The thyroid needs iodine to function properly and produce enough thyroid hormone. If you don't get enough iodine you are at risk for developing hypothyroidism or a goiter (which is when the thyroid gland becomes enlarged and swollen). Compared to the iodine that is contained in table salt, the amount in seaweed varies greatly. Since it is possible to get too much iodine, it is advised to eat no more than one seafood salad a week.

Dairy

Most of the iodine consumed by the average American comes from dairy products. However, our dairy consumption in general has been declining ever since the 1970s because people are drinking less milk. By drinking 1 cup of milk, you'll consume about one-third of your daily iodine needs. If you're not a huge fan of milk, cheddar cheese is another great option.

2. Supplements

It is always best to get your nutrients from food often it is difficult to get all our nutrition from diet alone. Both dietary changes and adding supplements can make a tremendous difference in your thyroid balance. The five essential supplements for thyroid health are iodine, vitamin D, selenium, magnesium, and B vitamins.

Iodine (150-300 mcg/day)

Iodine is the major supplement for boosting thyroid function. The body cannot produce iodine itself. Iodine is key in helping the thyroid gland make thyroid hormone. The thyroid is one of the largest glands in the body. It is responsible for a variety of bodily functions such as the use of energy, the creation of proteins and our overall reaction to other forms of hormones. The 2 main thyroid hormones known as T3 (triiodothyronine) and T4 (thyroxine) cannot be produced by the thyroid without hosting three and four iodine molecules, respectively.

Vitamin D (2,000 IU/day)

Vitamin D is necessary to help transport thyroid hormone into cells. It is naturally found in organ meats and oily fish. Some dairy products will be "fortified" with vitamin D such as milk.

Selenium (200 mcg/day)

Important for the enzymes that protect the thyroid from free radicals. Supplementation reduces immune over activity. Food sources include Brazil nuts, grass-fed meat, tuna, halibut

Magnesium (400 mg/day)

Magnesium is another mineral that helps regulate thyroid function, and is required for conversion of T4 to T3. You can get magnesium from your diet by eating dark leafy greens as well as nuts and seeds. Brazil nuts give you double the thyroid-powering benefits of magnesium and selenium. Other sources include avocados and dark chocolate

Vitamin B complex

Niacin and **riboflavin** are B-complex vitamins that regulate thyroid activity and contribute to the prevention of either an overactive or underactive thyroid. Food sources include meat, sea-food as well as nuts and seeds.

Copper (2 mg/day)

The thyroid gland is sensitive to a balance of copper and zinc. An imbalance can result in hypothyroidism. **Copper** and another trace mineral, **manganese**, help protect your thyroid from free radicals. Dietary sources are meat, poultry, eggs as well as nuts, seeds and grains

Zinc (20 mg/day)

Important for conversion of T4 (inactive) to the more active T3 hormone, so insufficient zinc can prevent your thyroid from making enough active thyroid hormone. Must be taken in correct proportion with copper. Dietary sources are meat, shrimp, spinach, flax and pumpkin seeds

Vitamin A (5,000 IU/day)

Beneficial impact on thyroid function by balancing the correct amount of thyroid hormones. Carrots are one of the well-known sources of vitamin A as well as sweet potatoes, leafy green vegetables but also liver and fish.

Iron (50-100 mg/day)

Low iron levels may affect several of the steps of thyroid hormone production. Many women suffer from iron deficient anemia either from poor nutrition or heavy menstrual flow. Well known sources of iron include meat and organ meats but also seafood, nuts and seeds, dark leafy green vegetables and even dark chocolate!

3. Lifestyle

Exercise

For those with an underactive thyroid, exercise can offer a natural antidote to symptoms such as weight gain, depression, muscle loss, and low energy levels as well as increase the levels of hormone production. For those with an overactive thyroid, exercise can help with symptoms of insomnia and mood.

Stress

Minimizing stress is an important strategy to help naturally balance the thyroid. Under stress, your body releases the hormone cortisol. Too much cortisol can interfere with thyroid hormone production. Recommended stress management techniques include yoga, meditation and other lifestyle changes to focus on breathing, and more importantly, slow down.

Sleep

While the thyroid has long been linked to metabolism, thyroid hormones have an important role in sleep regulation as well. Hypothyroidism also prevents the deepest, most important sleep. This may be another contributor to daytime fatigue in people with hypothyroidism. Besides causing daytime fatigue by slowing metabolism, hypothyroidism increases risk for some sleep disorders. About 30 percent of people with hypothyroidism have sleep apnea.

Start with improving your sleep hygiene. If symptoms do not improve always check with your doctor.