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# Tiny Gland Big Problems

## Is Your Thyroid Making You Fat?

**TWO YEARS AFTER THE BIRTH OF HER FIRST** son, Anne Krueger felt exhausted and irritable. She assumed it was just part of being the new mom of an energetic boy. But when she went in for a regular check up, she mentioned to her doctor that she was “feeling pooped” all the time. After a blood test, she was diagnosed with hypothyroidism, a condition where her thyroid gland wasn’t making enough hormones to regulate her metabolism as it should.

“I had no idea it was a thyroid problem. After I was diagnosed, I read up on the condition and found more symptoms that I had been experiencing, like hair loss,” said Krueger. “I had also gained

weight, but not a large amount. I was always crabby, but I thought it was just because I was tired all the time.”

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There are a variety of problems asso-

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ciated with the thyroid gland. The most common is hypothyroidism. Approximately 2 to 3 percent of Americans have the condition, and as many as 10 to 15 percent more have a mild form. What’s more, over half of the individuals who have hypothyroidism don’t even know it. Other common thyroid conditions include hypothyroidism (an overactive thyroid), thyroiditis, and both cancerous and benign thyroid nodules.

Hypothyroidism is a disease in which the thyroid produces an insufficient amount of thyroid hormones triiodothyronine (T3) and thyroxine (T4). Women, especially those over 50, are more likely to experience hypothyroidism than men. The rate also goes up during pregnancy, after delivery, and around menopause. At the onset of the disease there may be little or no symptoms, but over time low thyroid function leads to fatigue, weight gain, depression, high cholesterol, and other problems. Hypothyroidism can also cause a variety of changes in a woman’s menstrual cycle including irregularity, heavy periods, or loss of periods. When severe, hypothyroidism can reduce a woman’s chances of becoming pregnant.

It can also cause problems during pregnancy. “The thyroid has to work harder when a woman is pregnant,” said Dr. Colleen R. Carey, an endocrinologist with Endocrine Associates of Spokane. “If a woman has a thyroid problem, she may have to adjust her dose of synthetic hormones during pregnancy. Even if she wasn’t aware of a thyroid condition, new symptoms might show up.”

During Krueger’s second pregnancy, her thyroid problems returned. Because her hormone levels were so high, her doctor decided to completely take her off medication. “During the first 3 months of my pregnancy I was miserable,” she said. After giving birth to her second son, she began her medication while still in the hospital, and has now been on thyroid hormone therapy for

nearly 20 years.

According to Dr. Carey, hypothyroidism tends to become more severe the lower the levels of thyroid hormone become and the longer the problem persists, so it's important to have it diagnosed as soon as possible.

In contrast, hypothyroidism is a condition in which the thyroid is overactive and produces an excess of T3, T4, or both. This may cause sudden weight loss, a rapid or irregular heartbeat, sweating, and nervousness or irritability. After giving birth, a condition called postpartum thyroiditis may also cause hypothyroidism. "During postpartum thyroiditis the thyroid leaks hormone and levels become too high," said Dr. Carey. "The levels then go below normal and in most women, go back to normal after several months."

Another common thyroid condition is abnormal growths on the gland called nodules. They are so common that most women will develop a nodule by the time they are 50 years old. However, the majority of nodules don't present any symptoms and only about 5 percent are cancerous, Dr. Carey said. Thyroid cancer is more common in those who have a history of radiation exposure to the thyroid gland, have a family history of thyroid cancer, or are over 40 years old.

While there is no proven way to prevent thyroid conditions, Dr. Carey encourages women to have their thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) level checked at middle age and regularly after. Testing for both TSH and T4 levels is the most accurate way to determine

how the thyroid gland is functioning and both can be measured through a simple blood test.

"Because the symptoms of many thyroid conditions aren't specific, it's a good idea to get your TSH level checked," Dr. Carey said. She added that while many times the thyroid is not to blame for common symptoms such as weight gain and fatigue, it may be a good idea to test your hormone levels in case thyroid is the cause. "Things like weight gain and fatigue are often just part of the human condition," said Dr. Carey. "But it's important to get the correct diagnosis. Getting your thyroid tested can be a good place to start."

Anne Krueger agrees about the importance of that simple blood test. "If it wasn't for my wonderful doctor who picked up on my symptoms, I could have gone undiagnosed this whole time," said Krueger. "So many symptoms like being tired, hair loss, and irritability can go undiagnosed, and it's such an easy blood test. In my case, the results were life changing."

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