

Your Health Reference Sheet
Topic: Thyroid Disorders
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Tucked away at the base of the neck in front of the windpipe (trachea) is the little butterfly-shaped thyroid gland, only two inches in size, but with a very big job. When the thyroid gland is functioning normally as it does most of the time, there is little reason to give it a second thought. However, when it isn't functioning as it should, it's difficult to not think about. This is because the thyroid gland affects so much of the functioning of the body such as metabolism, absorption of food, insulin levels, calcium levels, protein utilization, sleep, and mental acuity.

Thyroid disorders are thought of as the great masqueraders because the symptoms they produce can be mistaken for other conditions. Consequently, thyroid disorders can be difficult to diagnose in the beginning. However, if left undiagnosed, these disorders can dramatically worsen and greatly diminish our ability to carry out daily activities. For these reasons, it is important to unmask these great masqueraders so they can be effectively treated. Many times, it requires that you take a proactive stance by requesting to have it checked, even if it is initially dismissed as normal.

If left untreated, low thyroid (hypothyroidism) can cause anemia, low body temperature, or heart failure. There is also new research showing that there may be evidence connecting low T3 levels with breast cancer.

While thyroid disorders affect men and women, they can even affect teenagers. Women over the age of 40 have the highest predisposition for hypothyroidism (low thyroid). It is believed this is because of the perimenopausal phase of menopause. In fact, currently, hypothyroidism is believed to affect 7 million Americans, most of whom are women between 30 and 50. In infants, poor thyroid functioning is called cretinism, marked by mental retardation and dwarfism.

Aging itself has only a minor effect on the thyroid gland and thyroid hormones. As people age, the thyroid shifts to lower in the neck and shrinks in size. The T3 level may fall slightly, but there is very little impact on the body's functioning. However, thyroid disorders do increase with age. For example, the elderly (over the age of 70) are particularly susceptible to undiagnosed or subclinical hypothyroidism.

Risk factors include B₁₂ deficiency, Type 2 diabetes, smoking, exposure to lead, high plasma homocysteine levels, low dose radiation, excessive dieting, fluoridated water, and hormonal changes due to menopause.

Thyroid Gland:

The thyroid gland is one of seven endocrine glands. The main purpose of the thyroid gland is to