

What is hypothyroidism?

Hypothyroidism, or low thyroid activity, means your thyroid gland is not making enough hormones. The thyroid gland is located in the front of your neck, just below your Adam's apple. It makes hormones that control metabolism, the pace of your body's processes. Metabolism includes things like your heart rate and how quickly you burn calories. Women, especially those over 50, are more likely to have hypothyroidism than men are. If left untreated, hypothyroidism can cause obesity, joint pain, infertility and heart disease.

What causes hypothyroidism?

The most common cause of hypothyroidism is an autoimmune disease called Hashimoto's thyroiditis. Normally, antibodies produced by the immune system help protect the body against viruses, bacteria and other foreign substances. An autoimmune disease is when your immune system produces antibodies that attack your body's tissues and/or organs. With Hashimoto's thyroiditis, antibodies attack the thyroid and keep it from producing enough hormones.

Other common causes of hypothyroidism include:

- Treatment for hyperthyroidism, the condition in which the body produces too much thyroid hormone
- Radiation therapy
- Thyroid surgery
- Certain medicines
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What are the symptoms of hypothyroidism?

The symptoms of hypothyroidism tend to develop slowly. They can be different from case to case. Initial symptoms include slight fatigue and sluggishness. As your metabolism slows, you may develop other symptoms:

- Increased sensitivity to cold
- Constipation
- Pale, dry skin
- Puffy face
- Hoarse voice
- Elevated blood cholesterol
- Unexpected weight gain
- Muscle aches, cramps, tenderness or stiffness
- Pain, stiffness or swelling in your joints
- Heavier than normal menstrual periods in women
- Depression
- Visibly enlarged thyroid
- Brittle hair and fingernails
- Forgetfulness

How will my doctor know I have hypothyroidism?

If you have symptoms of an underactive thyroid, your doctor will do tests that measure the levels of thyroid hormone and thyroid-stimulating hormone in your blood.

Some doctors recommend screening older women for hypothyroidism during routine physical examinations. Some also recommend screening pregnant women and women who are thinking about becoming pregnant.

How is hypothyroidism treated?

Treatment for an underactive thyroid is synthetic thyroid hormone taken daily in pill form. This medicine will regulate hormone levels and shift your metabolism back to normal. It will also lower your LDL cholesterol and may help reverse weight gain. It may take a few tries to get the right dose of synthetic thyroid hormone. If you are not taking enough, you may continue to experience symptoms of hypothyroidism. If you are taking too much, you may have symptoms similar to those of hyperthyroidism (overactive thyroid disease). Your doctor can tell if you are taking the right dose of thyroid hormone based on how you feel, by examination and by blood testing.