

# the **whole** family

FINDING *Gratitude*

*Vibrant* HOLIDAYS

FALL FOR *Pumpkin*

SPONSORED BY



AN  
**EcoParent**  
magazine  
PUBLICATION

# The BUTTERFLY EFFECT

*Your Thyroid and You*

*Dr. Kristen Mark, ND*



© Can Stock Photo Inc. / [Catwoman]

**T**he thyroid is a butterfly-shaped gland found in front of the throat and is often the culprit in cases ranging from low energy and brain fog to unexplained weight changes, and more. Thyroid disease is quite common, affecting about 1 in 10 Canadians, with women more likely to be affected (16 percent of women versus 4 percent of men).<sup>1</sup> In fact, it's estimated that 50 percent of cases of thyroid disease go undiagnosed.<sup>2</sup>

Thyroid hormones impact our whole body. Symptoms may show up in areas such as sleep trouble, body weight challenges, hair loss, dry skin, heart rate and temperature changes, constipation, as well as focus and memory issues. With such diverse symptoms, the root of the problem may be uncovered late in disease progression. This is especially true for women of colour, who are screened and diagnosed significantly less often.<sup>2</sup> Knowing what to look for can help speed up diagnosis and allow treatment to start sooner. Your clinician should consider your constellation of symptoms alongside thorough lab testing in order to determine your diagnosis and guide your course of treatment.

Although most diagnosed thyroid disease is treated with prescription medication, a naturopathic approach can help to buffer side effects, slow or prevent the need to increase medications, or in some cases, reduce the incidence of full-fledged disease when implemented at an early stage. Overall, a naturopathic approach to thyroid health can enhance your quality of life.

## *What does the thyroid do?*

The thyroid makes *triiodothyronine* (T3) and *tetraiodothyronine* (T4), hormones that affect just about every system in the body. They increase heart activity and circulation to the lungs, and increase our basal metabolic rate, which means elevated energy and oxygen use, and higher body temperature. These hormones also influence the way we either use or store fuel (like carbs, fats and proteins), and they affect the Central Nervous System (CNS), which can in turn impact mood, irritability, memory, speech, and wakefulness. Thyroid hormones are also key players in childhood growth, including brain and bone development, and are very important in maintaining healthy fetal development.<sup>3</sup>

## *Thyroid disease*

Benign nodules, or growths on the thyroid are common, and often not harmful, whereas malignant (cancerous) growths are less common and frequently have a good prognosis with early detection and treatment. Hyperthyroid (overactivity) and hypothyroid (underactivity) are more commonly associated with the symptoms mentioned and are often connected to autoimmune issues, where the immune system attacks the body's own cells.<sup>4</sup>

## *Hyperthyroidism*

When there's too much thyroid hormone circulating, the results can look like heart palpitations, high blood pressure, increased appetite, sweating, tremors, double vision, weight loss, fatigue, and weakness. The most common cause of hyperthyroidism is an autoimmune condition called Graves' disease, but other causes include thyroiditis (inflammation of the thyroid) or *adenomas* (non-cancerous growths on the thyroid gland), all causing an excessive production of thyroid hormone.

As a protection mechanism, when thyroid hormones go up, the brain quiets its signal to produce more, but this is not usually enough to balance things out. Lab work tends to reflect that, with low levels of thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH) along with elevated levels of T4 and T3.

## *Support and diagnosis*

Conventional medical treatments focus on suppressing the function of the thyroid, often through the use of radioactive iodine or surgical removal of the gland. Many cases of thyroiditis, however, are fleeting and go away on their own with resolution of the cause of inflammation (commonly a viral infection). In such cases, it's important to monitor that any infection is fully resolved, and that the thyroid stabilizes in the wake of this episode when it may be more vulnerable to further malfunction.

Naturopathic treatments for hyperthyroidism include removal or reduction of the inflammatory response, and in the case of Graves' disease, therapies that focus on improving autoimmune reactivity in the body. Targeted nutritional supplementation is also a key strategy in improving

cases of hyperthyroidism. Natural treatments work well in concert with conventional therapies to improve quality of life and reduce symptoms and medication side effects, while empowering patients to feel more in control of their bodies.

## Hypothyroidism

Lowered activity of the thyroid, or hypothyroidism is more common than hyperthyroidism. More than 80 percent of hypothyroid cases are related to autoimmune issues.<sup>5</sup> Women are predominantly affected, and disease onset tends to occur around periods of major hormonal change (such as pregnancy, postpartum, or menopause), or following a physical or emotional trauma.

Symptoms may include fatigue, low mood, brain fog, difficulty losing weight, high cholesterol, constipation, hair loss, dry skin, slowed heart rate, feeling cold, poor appetite, decreased libido, and irregular or heavy periods. Lab findings may show elevated TSH as the brain shouts at the thyroid to produce more hormone, with normal or lowered levels of T4 and T3.

Though signs and symptoms are generally the opposite of those seen with hyperthyroidism, there are exceptions. In Hashimoto's Thyroiditis, the immune system attacks thyroid cells. As the gland becomes damaged, we may see bouts of hyperthyroid symptoms as 'bubbles' of stored hormone are released, creating a fleeting spike in the body.<sup>3</sup>

Early changes may be seen in blood work, but initial standard lab tests can also appear normal. Often TSH alone is measured to screen for illness, which doesn't offer a complete picture of thyroid health. It's important to do a thorough evaluation that may include TSH, T4, T3, thyroid antibodies (markers of an autoimmune attack on the thyroid), and reverse T3, as well as screening tests for other possible contributing factors. Your assessment may also include a physical thyroid exam, and a thyroid ultrasound.<sup>3</sup> These results should then be interpreted in the context of your symptom picture to offer the best opportunity to develop an effective treatment plan.

## Support and diagnosis

The conventional approach to treatment is to use synthetic hormone to compensate for what the thyroid is not producing. While this is helpful, it doesn't address the underlying causes of disease, but merely helps regulate the amount of circulating thyroid hormone in order to reduce

symptoms.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, synthetic hormonal treatment may be withheld in the case of Hashimoto's until the thyroid becomes too damaged to function adequately. This leaves existing symptoms unmanaged and does nothing to prevent deconstruction of the thyroid.

From a naturopathic approach, the goal is to calm the immune system in the Hashimoto's patient, so that damage to the tissue can be slowed or halted while addressing other causes of thyroid dysfunction in order to bring hormonal regulation back online. In this way, we can improve symptoms, support overall health, and potentially avoid, or reduce, the need for medication down the road.

Talking to someone who is willing and able to do a full diagnostic workup is key to developing a successful treatment plan. Just as the thyroid affects many of our systems, its functions can be compromised when things are off in other parts of our body.<sup>7</sup> We may see signs and symptoms of thyroid dysfunction when there are issues with gut health, sex hormone imbalances, trouble with insulin regulation, and more. The better we understand what's at play, the more targeted and successful treatment can be.

## Thyroid care

Whether or not hormones will be a part of your treatment, there can always be more to it. Dietary and lifestyle changes can be foundational to improving your wellbeing. Nutritional and botanical supplementation can be immensely supportive and should be targeted to your symptom picture and individual state of health.

**STRESS MANAGEMENT** Reducing daily stress is crucial to thyroid health. When our nervous system is in overdrive, it strains our thyroid. This contributes to a cascade of increased physiological stress throughout the body, which in turn further strains the thyroid, fueling a destructive cycle. Putting stress reduction techniques into action and resolving other physiological stressors (such as acute or chronic illness) is key to supporting thyroid and overall health.

**GUT HEALTH** Attending to proper absorption, nutritional balance, microbial health and proper clearance (good daily poops!) is essential to keeping our body in good working order. Gut dysbiosis can contribute to thyroid disease, poor digestion, and mental health struggles, to name a few. Improving the health of the digestive system is



© Can Stock Photo Inc. / [sofiashunkina]



© Can Stock Photo Inc. / [Kabachkiphoto]

crucial when it comes to managing thyroid disease and is implicated in nearly all areas of health.

**ELIMINATING INFLAMMATION** Inflammation can be a trigger for thyroid disease and is very often a factor when it comes to chronic illness. If we're chronically inflamed, it means that we're always having a low-grade immune reaction. At this point, rather than helping us fight a threat or heal a wound, the immune reaction creates a systemic stress that causes damage to our tissues, leaving us more vulnerable.

**SYSTEMIC SUPPORT** The thyroid both impacts, and is impacted by, other hormones, making general hormonal regulation and balance across systems important. If, for example, our insulin, estrogen, or cortisol levels are all over the map, we'll have a terrible time balancing out any thyroid issues. Your naturopathic doctor can work with you to ensure that all systems are in order, to make sure you're feeling good and that improvements remain stable.

**MEDICINAL MANAGEMENT** Depending on your situation, hormone medication may be part of your treatment plan. This is highly dependent on how your thyroid is functioning, and what other systems may be involved. It's always necessary to discuss the options with your trusted healthcare provider to determine whether medication is needed.

The thyroid is a small but mighty part of our body that has a massive impact on how we feel and function. It's a sensitive gland that can let us know when other aspects of our system are off-balance. Caring for the thyroid includes managing stress, fostering healthy digestion and a robust microbiome, maintaining balance in other hormone systems, and reducing our overall burden of stress. Early and comprehensive diagnosis is an important component in effectively treating thyroid disease and improving quality of life. With these factors in mind and armed with the knowledge of what to look for and how to investigate thyroid health, you can rest assured that the little butterfly in your throat is in good hands. •

For references visit [ecoparent.ca/TWF/LATEFALL21](https://ecoparent.ca/TWF/LATEFALL21)