

Thyroid Disease May Mean the Blahs

By: Wendy Hladick

In Alaska, feeling sluggish and tired can often be blamed on inclement weather, lack of exercise and working too hard combined with stress, or simply “getting older.” But it can also be the earliest sign of an underactive thyroid gland.

I was taught that hypothyroidism is among the easiest conditions to recognize in a patient, but among the most often undiagnosed.

The thyroid gland is a small butterfly-shaped gland in your neck just below your Adam’s apple. This tiny gland has an enormous job to do regulating your body’s metabolism.

That means regulating the rate of your heartbeat and also controlling the speed at which your body burns calories. The thyroid gland does all this by secreting hormones.

As long as hormone levels are adequate, your metabolism runs normally. But if the thyroid gland fails to make and release enough hormones, symptoms of hypothyroidism occur.

As thyroid function dwindles, chemical reactions in the body’s cells slow, causing the feeling of sluggishness and fatigue. Many people would like nothing more than to sleep. As the metabolism slows further, cold hands and feet, pale dry skin, constipation and a hoarse voice can occur. Fluid retention can lead to a puffy face and weight gain.

The thyroid gland in the neck can become bigger, causing what’s known as a “goiter.” A health care provider may feel that during an exam.

The thyroid gland can produce too much thyroid hormone in a condition known as “hyperthyroidism.” People with too much thyroid hormone have warm moist skin and sweat too much. Their eyes may bulge out and they may experience heart palpitations and weight loss. As expected, too much of the hormone causes a speeding of the body’s metabolism. But symptoms of an underactive thyroid gland are more frequent.

Hypothyroidism affects 6 million to 7 million Americans, mainly women older than 40. Younger woman may experience irregular menstrual cycles or stop menstruating completely if her thyroid gland is not working properly. Only about half of these cases are recognized early, because the initial symptoms are so vague. Advanced or extreme hypothyroidism is rare, but can lead to a life-threatening coma.

Causes of hypothyroidism are many, and can range from disease affecting newborns, to one’s own immune system attacking the thyroid tissue, and dietary iodine deficiencies. Thanks to the introduction of iodized salt in the 1920s, and the use of iodine additions in enriched breads and other foods processed in the United States, dietary deficiencies are no longer a U.S. concern. Water, dairy products and seafood also contain natural iodine.

Diagnosing mild thyroid disease has become much easier using blood tests. Treatment is simple, the effects are immediate, and usually there are few complications.