

## Thyroid Disease

**T**he thyroid is a butterfly-shaped gland located in the front of the neck, with 1 “wing” on either side of the windpipe. It’s small—only about 2 inches long—but it produces a hormone that affects the entire body. The thyroid hormone regulates temperature, moods, appetite, the reproductive system, muscle strength, and most important, how the body creates energy from food. The heart, liver, kidneys, skin—actually, every organ, tissue, and cell in the body—needs the right amount of thyroid hormone to work well.

An estimated 20 million Americans have a thyroid disorder, and as many as 60% don’t know it. When the thyroid doesn’t work right, it’s usually making too little thyroid hormone, a condition called hypothyroidism. (Hypo means *under*.) Less commonly, the thyroid may make too much thyroid hormone, is called hyperthyroidism. (Hyper means *over*.)

### How do I know if I’m at risk?

Women are more likely than men to have thyroid problems. One in 8 women will have a thyroid disorder at some point. Thyroid problems are also more common among people over age 60.

### What are the warning signs?

If you have mild hypothyroidism, you might not have any symptoms. But if your levels of thyroid hormone drop too low, your body will slow down, and you may notice the following symptoms:

- Feeling rundown, depressed, cold, and tired.
- Hair and skin may become dry.
- Constipation along with muscle cramps.
- Heavier periods in women.

However, if your thyroid is producing too much thyroid hormone, your body goes into

overdrive, and you may notice:

- Feeling nervous and irritable and have trouble sleeping.
- Heart palpitations or a racing sensation, and your hands may shake.
- More frequent bowel movements than usual.
- Weight loss, even if you previously had a good appetite.
- Lighter, less frequent periods in women.

### When do I need medical attention?

If you have any of these signs or symptoms, you should see a doctor. Because the thyroid controls so much of what goes on in your body, a thyroid disorder not only affects how you feel, but also can cause serious problems. If left untreated, thyroid problems may lead to other conditions such as osteoporosis (os-tee-oh-puh-roh-sis), high cholesterol (kuh-les-tuh-rohl), heart disease, and infertility.

### What tests do I need?

A simple blood test can tell you if your thyroid is working correctly. The blood test measures the amount of thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) in your blood and can detect even mild cases. A high level of TSH usually means there isn’t enough thyroid hormone in your blood. A low level means your blood has too much thyroid hormone.

If you’re at high risk for thyroid problems, your health care provider may want you to have a TSH test even if you haven’t felt any symptoms. Consider being tested if you:

- Are a woman, especially if you’re over 40 or have recently given birth.
- Have high cholesterol.
- Are feeling depressed.
- Have had a thyroid disease in the past or have a family history of thyroid disease.

