

Thyroid health important to all, says expert

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Thyroid problems are five to eight times more likely to impact women than men. However, Baylor College of Medicine's Dr. Ruchi Gaba cautions that any person, regardless of gender or age, can be affected by thyroid issues.

The [thyroid](#) is a small butterfly shaped gland that sits low on the front of your neck and is responsible for regulating the body's metabolism, said Gaba, assistant professor of medicine – endocrinology at Baylor. Two of the most common thyroid diseases are [hypothyroidism](#), or a low thyroid, and hyperthyroidism, an overactive thyroid.

A majority of the people with hypothyroidism have vague, nonspecific symptoms that don't necessarily indicate that something is wrong with their [thyroid gland](#). Common symptoms of hypothyroidism include fatigue, dry skin, constipation, weight gain, muscle aches, increased sensitivity to cold and a slowed heart rate. Hyperthyroidism results in symptoms like increased heart rate, tremors, anxiety, heat intolerance, diarrhea and weight loss, said Gaba.

Gaba explained that environmental iodine deficiency is the most common cause of hypothyroidism worldwide, but in United States, which is considered an area of iodine sufficiency, the most common cause of hypothyroidism is chronic autoimmune thyroiditis (Hashimoto's thyroiditis).

Hyperthyroidism also can be secondary to an autoimmune disease such as Graves' disease, Gaba said. However, other causes can include a thyroid nodule that is hyperfunctioning or inflammation in the thyroid gland.

Additional issues concerning the thyroid gland are thyroid cancer and goiters, which are signaled by lumps or swelling in the neck area.

Gaba said the best way to diagnose a thyroid issue to have blood work done.

"You need a blood test to confirm that there is a problem with the thyroid. It's not just based on the symptoms," Gaba said. "Plus, in some people with underactive thyroid, the symptoms take some time to develop and might not always be clinically recognizable which is why blood work is really important."

Gaba explained that treatment options for thyroid issues vary.

If thyroid hormone levels are low, like in those with hypothyroidism, it is recommended the patient takes a thyroid supplement that increases levels. On the other hand, if a patient has hyperthyroidism, the suggested treatment options are anti-thyroid medications or radioactive iodine therapy.

Surgical removal of the thyroid is considered when patients do not respond to other [treatment options](#) or have [thyroid cancer](#).

A question that Gaba often receives when treating patients at the Baylor thyroid clinic is if there were any preventive measures the patients could have taken.

"I always tell patients that there is nothing that they could have done to prevent the problem; whether the thyroid issue is the result of an autoimmune disease or a nodule, it's just something that happens," Gaba said. "In addition, there is no evidence that eating or avoiding certain foods can control or improve thyroid function."

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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