

“Low thyroid not uncommon with aging”

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We have seen quite a few people in the office lately for thyroid issues. These people have either had symptoms of such, or perhaps the condition was found on some routine lab work. Regardless, it is a common situation with normal aging, and seems to affect women more often than men. The good news is that it is easily treatable and manageable once properly diagnosed.

The thyroid gland is one of the largest of the endocrine glands, located in the front of the neck just below the Thyroid Cartilage of the trachea (better known as the “Adams Apple”). It is a butterfly shaped gland with right and left lobes (“wings”) that are joined in the midline. The main function of this important gland is to help manage how your body uses energy, or in other words, it is the major regulator of your *metabolism*.

The thyroid produces two main hormones to help regulate your metabolism. These substances are commonly known as T3 and T4. They are produced by the thyroid and secreted in the blood stream when the gland feels the influence of Thyroid Stimulating Hormone, better known as TSH. Sufficient production of T3 and T4 will shut down TSH. If not enough of these two hormones are present, TSH level will rise to try and stimulate production. For most people, this feedback system maintains the correct balance in the body, but if not enough T3 and T4 are being made, your TSH will rise and you will still not be able to produce enough of the two hormones. We call this condition *hypothyroidism*, meaning “too little” thyroid.

In these patients, we will see their T3 and T4 on the low side, and their TSH will often be very high trying to stimulate production of the hormones. In hypothyroid patients, complaints of lethargy and fatigue, bradycardia (slow heart rate), abnormal weight gain, constipation, cold intolerance (cold when others are not), and hair loss are common. The cause of this condition can be one of many things or a combination of factors. There are congenital (from birth) conditions, autoimmune disorders, iodine deficiency, surgical removal, or perhaps some other illness has caused damage to the thyroid. In these patients, once the cause is determined and addressed, they will likely need to take synthetic thyroid hormone for the rest of their life, but will do very well with no ill effects.

If you are experiencing some of the above symptoms, talk to your provider. Usually, some basic lab work can help nail the diagnosis, and you can start treatment very quickly, if needed. By re-establishing the proper balance of thyroid hormones, you will begin to feel much better as the symptoms regress with treatment. Don't be like the person who said “Lazy is such an ugly word....I prefer thyroid challenged.” If you think there might be a problem, rise to the challenge! Get checked and treated if needed – you will be glad you did.