The Earth is ailing, and as the planet’s life systems weaken, so do the systems of our bodies. As soil, water, and air become more and more polluted, human health is suffering, with new illnesses emerging and the incidence of a variety of systemic disorders rising. This relationship between planetary ecological health and personal health is nowhere more evident than in the growing incidence of thyroid disease.

Thyroid disease is systemic, affecting the entire body. People suffering from thyroid disorders experience energy surges and dips, often feeling extreme fatigue, sometimes alternating with manic, high-energy periods. Digestive systems are affected, and diarrhea or constipation can be symptoms of thyroid levels that are too high or too low. Hair loss, skin problems, and weight gain or loss can be symptoms, and if left untreated, thyroid disease can cause serious health problems, including heart failure. Depression is frequently a symptom, and after several high-profile cases of untreated thyroid disease ending in suicide, thyroid function tests are now considered routine in mental health evaluations.

Thyroid disease is an “indicator”—a canary in the coal mine of our global ecological crisis. On both the planetary and the individual level, real healing requires a whole-systems approach: looking at all of the environmental factors that contribute to this growing problem and working toward systemic repair. In many cases, individuals with thyroid disease can experience healing with a holistic approach, including herbal medicine, nutrition and supplements, yoga, meditation and lifestyle changes. Ecological healing is the only solution to the “root cause” problems of thyroid disease.

The thyroid is a butterfly-shaped gland at the base of the throat. Its function is to produce thyroid hormone, which is often described as the “gas that runs the car” of your body. It regulates your heartbeat, helps your digestive system work, moderates your energy flow and keeps all of the systems in your body moving. Thyroid hormone is crucial for immune system function and healthy metabolism. People whose bodies produce too much thyroid hormone are hyperthyroid; people whose bodies don’t produce enough are hypothyroid. Hypothyroidism is much more common than hyperthyroidism, though some people experience both conditions at different times. One pattern, sometimes described as a “thyroid burnout” involves the gland overworking itself in a frenzy of hormone production and eventually crashing, unable to perform any longer. This article is focused on hypothyroidism, which is now occurring at near epidemic portions among women.

Conservative estimates place the rate of hypothyroidism among all women in the US at one in eight. And recent adjustments to the scale for diagnosing hypothyroidism mean that far more women will be considered hypothyroid in years to come. Like many health conditions that disproportionately affect women, thyroid disease is often ignored or downplayed. Many hypothyroid women present with a long list of subjective ailments, complaining of sluggishness, depression, weakness and “just not feeling right.” In the long allopathic tradition of labeling “mysterious” health problems suffered by women as hysteria, much of the medical establishment has paid little attention to hypothyroidism. Women may also be quickly diagnosed with depression or anxiety, and given band-aid prescriptions for anti-depressants or anti-anxiety drugs rather than being treated for the underlying cause of these symptoms. Advocating for diagnosis and treatment of thyroid disease has become a women’s issue. The origins and growing incidence of the disease point to significant political and ecological issues that merit the attention of people interested in holistic health.

Ecological Origins of Thyroid Disease

Radioactive pollution, pesticides and soil depletion are clearly linked to thyroid disease. Specifically to blame are radioactive iodine emitted from nuclear facilities for the past fifty years and synthetic estrogens and estrogenic chemicals, including pesticides, dumped into ecosystems around the world. Also contributing is the depletion of trace minerals from soils around the planet through nonsustainable agriculture and development.

To do its job, the thyroid needs iodine, L-tyrosine (an amino acid), and selenium (a mineral which helps the iodine and L-tyrosine combine to make thyroid hormone).

Iodine is scarce on land, though plentiful in the oceans, and only one form of iodine existed on the planet for millennia—until 1944. With the advent of nuclear technology, a new form of iodine was born: a radioactive isotope that was produced in nuclear reactions. Between 1944 and 1956, this form of iodine, iodine-131, was unregulated; nuclear facilities could dump as much of it as they produced. And they did. In 1956, limits were placed on how much iodine-131 facilities could release per day. But emissions from nuclear power and weapons facilities continued and still continue. For example, the Oak Ridge facility in Tennessee emits the maximum daily allowable quantity of radioactive iodine every day. After more than fifty years of nuclear pollution, radioactive iodine is now ubiquitous in our environment. There is almost nowhere on the planet today where radioactive iodine is not found in significant amounts.

The thyroid gland is damaged by absorbing this radioactive iodine and this damage is linked to thyroid disease, including thyroid cancer. Most commonly, absorbing this radioactive pollutant decreases the thyroid gland’s function to the point of hypothyroidism.
As if this isn’t enough for the beleaguered thyroid gland to handle, there is an additional stress: pesticides and other estrogen-like chemicals have saturated air, water and soil in many parts of the world. Too much estrogen in relation to the amount of progesterone in women’s bodies is linked to thyroid disease, as well as dysmenorrhea (heavy bleeding and severe cramping with periods), uterine fibroids and other problems. For men, this estrogen overload in our environment can cause low sperm counts and other sexual problems. Males of a number of species (including alligators and fish) that live in water systems where large volumes of estrogenic pesticide runoff are now being born with intersex, ambiguous, or feminized reproductive systems.

Finally, selenium, the trace mineral that facilitates the process of conversion of iodine and L-tyrosine into thyroid hormone, is greatly depleted in many soils around the globe. Mineral-poor soil grows mineral-poor food. In an area known as the “disease belt” in China, there is almost no selenium in the soil, which has a huge impact on human health. Selenium deficiency is linked to overall impaired immune system function and is a key component in thyroid function.

Conventional Approaches

People suffering from hypothyroidism, if they are lucky enough to be diagnosed at all, are usually directed by allopathic physicians to begin hormone replacement therapy and advised that this treatment will need to continue indefinitely. Synthroid, the synthetic thyroid replacement drug, is considered by some patient advocates to be largely ineffective, for biochemical reasons that I’ll leave out of this article (more information is readily available on the Internet). Armour, the non-synthetic thyroid hormone replacement drug, is pig thyroid hormone derived from slaughterhouse pork.

Patients are generally advised that not taking hormone replacements puts them at risk for larger health problems later in life and that there are no effective ways of treating thyroid disease with herbal medicine or other “alternative” approaches. Restoring the health of the air, water and soil is the only long-term solution to thyroid disease from a public health point of view.

An Integrative Approach

A holistic approach to healing hypothyroidism begins with the understanding that we are part of the earth, and the earth is part of us. This is not an abstract concept, but a very concrete physical reality. The food we eat, the air we breathe, the water we drink and the very molecules of our physical bodies are made up of the same substances as the planet itself. Detoxifying our environment is the most important long-term approach to treating thyroid disease. It is impossible to avoid toxins in our environment until we accomplish global ecological repair. But of course, this process will take lifetimes, especially where radioactive contaminants are concerned.

In the meantime, detoxifying our own bodies and “building the soil” of our own systems is an important first step. The weakened thyroid gland can be greatly affected by a number of everyday environmental toxins, particularly heavy metals, chlorine and fluoride, which should be avoided whenever possible. Chemically treated swimming pools, hot tubs, and showers; metal fillings; and mercury-polluted fish in the diet are some common culprits.

A detoxifying diet is the first recommendation for any thyroid treatment plan. A two-week to one-month strict cleanse is ideal. One effective cleanse that many have found helpful incorporates macrobiotic, raw and probiotic elements. In short, this means lots of brown rice, lemon water, juice, raw fruits and vegetables, and avoiding meat, dairy, and sugar. Also, alcohol should be avoided during this time. If possible, also eat only pesticide-free foods during this cleanse and in the long-term.

A thyroid-supportive diet can sustain your healing over the long-term. After your initial cleanse, moderate amounts of dairy can be phased back into your diet, provided that it is organic and hormone-free (preferably raw). Conventionally at least contains estrogenic hormones and pesticides that damage the thyroid. Vegetables and whole, pre-soaked grains should continue to be staples of your diet, with soaked nuts and seeds, fermented foods, and if you’re a meat eater, organic and hormone-free meats only. Estrogenic foods, including peanuts and processed and raw soy (including soy milk and tofu) should be avoided; fermented soy (tamari, miso, tempeh) is fine but should not be overused. Brassicas (broccoli, kale, cabbage, collards, and other vegetables in their family) are goitregenic foods, which means they sap iodine from your system and should be avoided. Cooking or fermenting decreases the goitregenic properties, but do not entirely eliminate them; limit cooked or fermented brassicas and eliminate raw brassicas. Choose chard, spinach, or lamb’s quarter over kale or collards for your leafy greens; chard contains iodine, lamb’s quarter and spinach contain L-tyrosine. Coconut oil, which contains medium chain fatty acids (MCFAs) can improve metabolism for hypothyroid people.

One Brazil nut a day supplies all of the selenium your body needs to fuel the conversion of iodine and L-tyrosine to thyroid hormone. Just keep a jar of Brazil nuts in your fridge and pop one per day; one nut contains a healthy daily dose.

The most significant thyroid-healing herbs are seaweeds, packed with the iodine that builds thyroid in our bodies. Digesting iodine from plant-based sources (rather than simply pouring on the iodized salt) is the most effective approach. High-quality, clean, sustainably-harvested seaweed of any sort (preferably uncooked and unprocessed) can be soaked for salads, used in soup, or thrown into stir-fries, vegetable ferments, or other dishes. Seaweed gomasio, a traditional Japanese sesame/salt condiment is an easy way to sprinkle plant-based iodine onto practically any meal. Bladderwrack (Fucus vesiculosus), the seaweed of choice for thyroid healing, can be crumbled into a bowl with water and soaked overnight for a delicious seaweed salad with wakame or alarian, raw carrots and

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beets, garlic, ginger, sunflower seeds, and sesame oil. Bladderwrack can also be taken in capsule form, which is highly recommended for people with severe hypothyroidism. Especially when your thyroid levels are precariously low, bladderwrack capsules sufficient to provide up to five grams of iodine per day are recommended. Bladderwrack and seaweeds are contraindicated if you have hyperthyroidism; do not take them if you suffer from an overactive thyroid gland.

Since seaweeds are considered cooling herbs, they should be balanced with warming herbs such as ginger and tumeric, which are also great tonics for uterine problems that may accompany estrogen-progesterone imbalance. These warming herbs tend to be energizing as well, which helps with low-thyroid symptoms right away. One cup a day of coffee or similar doses of other stimulating plants can help boost energy, and tonic/energy-building herbs can be added for long-term systemic healing. Consult a knowledgeable herbalist for a complete thyroid-supportive herbal approach.

Heat and cold can be beneficial to the thyroid, as well. Hydrotherapy cycles, alternating exposure to hot and cold chemical-free water, stimulates the immune system, and all of the body’s systems, and some believe can “jump-start” thyroid function. If you are not lucky enough to live near an affordable chem-free spa, alternating 30-second cycles of hot and cold shower is an effective way to experience this hot/cold hydrotherapy treatment.

Since the thyroid gland needs L-tyrosine as well as iodine to produce thyroid hormone, it’s a good idea to take in 500 mg per day of this amino acid. Food sources of L-tyrosine include eggs, legumes, dairy, and other protein-rich foods. If you take L-tyrosine as a dietary supplement, take it with water first thing in the morning before eating. A good multivitamin with B vitamins for energy, particularly if you can find a high-quality, food-based, probiotic multivitamin, rounds out the thyroid supplement plan.

Nutrition and herbal therapy alone can significantly improve thyroid function. But when a thyroid supportive yoga practice is added, along with regular movement and exercise, along with meditation, the thyroid can truly be brought to life. A morning yoga practice with repetition of thyroid-supportive poses (the core poses are cobra, fish, and plough) and breath work can improve energy levels drastically for hypothyroid people, and contribute to increased thyroid function. Ujjayi breath, a yoga practice moving breath through the back of the throat, is also considered thyroid-supportive. People with hypothyroidism should consult with a knowledgeable yoga teacher to develop a personal practice in support of thyroid healing.

Meditation—specifically setting intentions, visualization and healing mantras—is an important component of the healing process. The thyroid

**Thyroid Health Continued from page 11**

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sits at the center of the fifth chakra, the throat chakra, associated with expression and “giving voice.” We can nourish that bodily energy center by giving voice in whatever way is most natural for us. For some this is singing, for others writing, speaking, praying, repeating mantras or spells, sighing, groaning, whooping, and in general voicing whatever emotions or thoughts we are stifling. The mantra “heal, give voice” is one that nourishes and opens channels for expressive energy.

Recipe for a healthy thyroid

This recipe combines thyroid-healing herbs (seaweeds) with iodine-rich sunflower seeds, nutritious raw veggies, warming ginger, protein-rich nuts and seeds, and tonic herbs (garlic, dandelion, and parsley). It can be a staple of a short-term cleanse and/or an ongoing part of a thyroid-supportive diet.

**Savory seaweed salad**

- ¼ cup dried bladderwrack
- ½ cup dried wakame, alaria, or other salad seaweed, chopped (you can use kitchen scissors to cut the seaweed fronds; it’s easier than a knife)
- 2 or 3 beets, to taste
- 2 or 3 carrots, to taste
- handful fresh dandelion greens
- handful fresh parsley
- ½ cup soaked sunflower seeds
- ½ cup soaked nuts of your choice (walnuts and almonds work well)
- 1-2 inches fresh ginger root
- 3 large cloves garlic
- 1/8 -1/4 cup each: tamari or shoyu, sesame oil, and rice vinegar or apple cider vinegar
- tsp. miso paste (amount can be adjusted depending on how “juicy” you want your salad to be)
- optional: a couple of dashes of mirin (Japanese rice sweetener) or a tsp. of honey

You can buy bladderwrack and other seaweeds dried and uncooked from companies that specialize in high-quality seaweeds. A great source of sustainably-harvested seaweed is www.maineseaweedcompany.com. Live-culture miso is available from several companies, including southrivermiso.com.

Soak seaweeds in room-temperature water for several hours, or even overnight. Drain, and reserve the soaking water for your garden or compost pile—it’s great for plants!

Soak sunflower seeds and nuts for at least a few hours, too. Peel and grate beets and carrots. Combine with seaweed in a big bowl. Chop dandelion greens and parsley and add to the seaweed and veggies, along with the sunflower seeds and nuts. Mix well.

Peel the garlic cloves, and using a garlic press, squeeze the garlic into a smaller mixing bowl or glass measuring pitcher. Peel and grate (using a fine grater) ginger to taste. I like a lot of ginger; for the more faint of heart, an inch or so will do.

Mix the tamari or shoyu, sesame oil, vinegar, and optional sweetener together with the ginger and garlic. Add a little black pepper if you want.

Pour the dressing over the salad and stir well. Serve with brown rice or another whole grain. Serve immediately, or allow to marinate for up to several days. This salad can be made in a big batch and refrigerated. It’s flavors will continue to “marry” and change subtly over time. Enjoy!
A **thyroid-supportive lifestyle** is one of the most important healing strategies for people with thyroid disease. Decreasing exposure to environmental toxins is a basic step; decreasing stress and simplifying your life represent more emotional or energetic detoxification. Nurturing your thyroid means nurturing your whole body, as well as your spirit and mind.

**Diagnosing, Testing and Tracking Your Thyroid**

If you are a hypothyroid person practicing an integrative healing approach, it is important to track your thyroid levels. Find a physician who is willing to test your TSH (thyroid stimulating hormone) levels monthly. This is the standard thyroid function test, a simple blood test that will help you monitor your thyroid function. Your doctor can explain the relationship between the lab values and your thyroid’s health. It is important to make sure that your treatment is lowering your TSH levels, indicating a rising level of thyroid hormone in your blood.

**Thyroid testing**

When Thyroid Stimulating Hormone (TSH) is high, it means that your body is not getting enough thyroid hormone and is trying to make more. Typical labs describe the TSH as being high when it is greater than 5.5. However, the American Association of Clinical Endocrinology recommends treating people until their TSH has gone below 3.0 – estimating 20% of Americans to be hypothyroid.\(^1\) In addition, a number of people have problems with their thyroids because of auto-immune inflammation of the thyroid gland. That is, the body is attacking itself. Evaluating thyroid antibodies can help to determine if there is imbalance present and may be an important reason why the integrative approach is so helpful.

Whether you have experienced this ailment on a personal level or not, you can help in the ecological healing that will ultimately address the root cause of thyroid disease and heal not only our bodies, but also the body of the planet.

**Resources available at newlifejournal.com**

Beth Trigg is a writer and activist who has worked in the nonprofit sector for more than ten years; contact her at btrigg@main.nc.us. After being diagnosed with severe hypothyroidism, she healed her thyroid over the course of six months with an intensive treatment program of herbs, nutrition, yoga, meditation, and lifestyle changes, with support from several community practitioners; she is now healthy and her thyroid hormone levels are normal.