Low Thyroid Got You Down? How It Happens, What to Do

Q. My doctor says I have an underactive thyroid. Is my diet to blame?

A. No. It's not likely that anything in your diet caused your condition. An underactive thyroid gland (hypothyroidism) is actually quite common, affecting about 18% of Americans. Untreated, it can lead to goiter (enlargement of the thyroid gland), but ever since iodized salt was introduced, goiter is not often seen in the U.S.

Who Gets It? Hypothyroidism is most common in women over the age of 50. Diagnosis is important, because early treatment can prevent the condition from becoming severe. However, there are no "typical" symptoms of hypothyroidism.

More than half the people with low thyroid levels don't even know it, because symptoms are often mild. Among the most common are fatigue; lack of energy; feeling cold when people around you are warm; dry, itchy skin; weight gain (5 to 20 pounds); depression; hair loss and memory problems. Your doctor will need to confirm the diagnosis with a simple blood test of your thyroid hormone levels.

Are Foods Responsible? Certain foods, including broccoli, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, kale, turnips and soy, contain compounds called goitrogens, which are known to interfere with thyroid function. But the amounts people eat in a normal diet don't cause hypothyroidism, plus scientists believe cooking inactivates them.

Is Iodine the Answer? Iodine is essential for proper thyroid function, but a lack of iodine is generally not a problem in the U.S. Still, government studies suggest that a growing number of people consume less iodine than 20 years ago, probably because they've cut back on salt.

Iodine is most prevalent in iodized salt, of course, and in seafood, but is also found in dairy products, chicken, beef and pork. Just one-half teaspoon of iodized salt provides the Daily Value of iodine. Most multivitamins also provide ample iodine.

Ironically, getting too much iodine can worsen—or cause—hypothyroidism. Excessive iodine is usually from supplements that contain kelp, a type of seaweed promoted to treat underactive thyroid.

EN's Bottom Line. Most of the time, hypothyroidism is not due to a lack of iodine, but EN recommends checking your multi for it anyway. While many Chinese herbs, selenium, iodine-tyrosine supplements, kelp and other herbal remedies may promise to jump-start the thyroid, the American Thyroid Association says none have proved effective. The only proven treatment is to take thyroid hormone replacement daily for the rest of your life.

Hidden Benefits of "Real" Walking Trump the Trusty Treadmill

Q. I’m thinking about buying a treadmill, but is “real” walking better?

A. It depends on your needs. You may be tempted to plunk down a thousand dollars or more on a treadmill, but before you do, read on to find out what you can—and cannot—expect. The last thing you need is an expensive laundry rack.

EN spoke with Vincent Perez, P.T., physical therapist and director of Columbia Eastside Sports Therapy in New York City, who said the only advantage of a treadmill in your home is convenience.

Perception vs Reality. "Common barriers to working out are the perceived inconvenience and time it takes to go somewhere," says Perez. "Having a treadmill helps alleviate these barriers." Theoretically. But surprisingly, research does not show that people with home exercise equipment actually exercise any more than those without this convenience. In fact, it’s just the opposite, says Perez.

People are actually more consistent and diligent about exercise if they go elsewhere to get fit—the Y, a health club, an adult-ed class. Perhaps it’s the commitment of purchasing a membership, paying for a class or meeting up with friends. However, he adds, people who are disciplined about exercise do fine with a home treadmill.

Treadmill Incline Doesn’t Do It All. A treadmill workout can mimic outdoor terrain if it has incline capabilities. But research shows that walking or jogging on outdoor terrain is actually more varied and provides a better total workout than a treadmill, says Perez.

For instance, walking on uneven surfaces like trails or sandy beaches engages your abdominals, back and hips (your “core”), which helps stabilize your body on uneven surfaces. It also strengthens the small muscles of your feet and ankles. All this improves your balance, important for preventing falls.

Downhill Beneficial Too. Remember the old boast about walking 10 miles to school, in the snow, uphill both ways? Well, a treadmill actually allows you to walk only uphill; it doesn’t do downhill. Seems like a benefit, but recent research has found that the payoffs for uphill and downhill walking are different.

Austrian researchers have found that uphill walking requires more energy—no surprise there—and provides a better cardiovascular workout, while also lowering blood triglyceride levels. But downhill actually improves blood sugar levels more. The researchers speculate that different types of muscle contractions account for the different benefits.

EN’s Bottom Line. With or without a treadmill, the real take-home message is that everyone needs to walk more.

"It’s better to walk anywhere than not to walk at all," says Perez. Look for any excuse to walk outside, but take care not to stumble or be a target for vehicles. Adjust the incline on that treadmill when you’re not outdoors. When all else fails, there’s always the stairs.

For beginners, Perez recommends 20 to 30 minutes of flat walking at a moderate pace three to four times a week. Eventually, increase to 45 minutes three to five times a week on varied terrain or on an incline on the treadmill.