Natural Support for Thyroid Health

by Michael T. Murray, N.D.

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Do you struggle with your weight? Do you often feel blue or depressed? Do you have trouble concentrating or dealing with stress? Do you get more than one or two colds a year? Do you suffer from lack of libido? Do you have digestive disturbances? Do you have weak, brittle or cracked nails? Is your hair dry and lifeless?

All of these symptoms and more may be due to one single factor—an underactive thyroid gland. Since thyroid hormones affect every cell of the body, a deficiency will usually result in a large number of signs and symptoms including weight gain or an inability to lose weight, depression, lack of concentration and fatigue. Low thyroid function (hypothyroidism) is an extremely common condition that is estimated to affect nearly 20 percent of all women and 10 percent of all men in the United States.

Diagnosing low thyroid function
Your doctor can conduct blood tests that measure thyroid hormone levels. The test assesses the quantity of T4 and T3 hormones as well as thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH) released by the pituitary gland. Low levels of thyroid hormones and high levels of TSH indicate hypothyroidism. However, in milder cases of thyroid hormone insufficiency, the blood tests may show that hormone levels are within “normal” ranges, even if the person is experiencing symptoms. These individuals usually respond quite well to targeted nutritional and herbal support. These individuals also tend to have a low basal body temperature.

Your body temperature reflects your metabolic rate, a rate that in turn is largely determined by thyroid hormone activity. When your thyroid is not functioning up to par, the basal body temperature is reduced. Many health experts believe that determining your basal body temperature is the most sensitive test of thyroid function. The test is simple: all you need is a thermometer.

**Taking Your Basal Body Temperature**

1. Plan to take the test first thing in the morning after you wake-up, because it’s important to measure temperature after you have had adequate rest.
2. Before going to sleep, if you are not using a digital thermometer, shake down a regular thermometer to below the 95-degree mark and place it by your bed.
3. Immediately upon waking, place the thermometer in your armpit (if using a regular thermometer keep it there for a full 10 minutes). Hold your elbow close to your side to keep the thermometer in place.
4. Read and record the temperature and date.
5. Repeat the test for at least three mornings (preferably at the same time of day).
6. A reading between 97.6 and 98.2 degrees F is normal. Readings below 97.6 F may indicate hypothyroidism.

Note: Menstruating women must perform the test on the second, third and fourth days of menstruation. Men and postmenopausal women can perform the test at any time.

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Dealing with hypothyroidism

Severe hypothyroidism requires the use of supplemental thyroid hormone—available only by prescription.

Mild or subclinical hypothyroidism may respond to nutritional and herbal support. Like other glands, the thyroid has special nutritional needs. Here are some of the key nutrients required for proper thyroid function:

- **Iodine.** The thyroid gland needs iodine to make its hormones. In fact, iodine's only role in the body is in making thyroid hormones. Too little iodine can cause impaired thyroid function, while too much iodine can actually interfere with the thyroid's ability to produce hormones. The dosage range for iodine supplementation is 300 to 400 mcg per day. Read the labels on your multivitamin supplement and on any thyroid preparations you are taking. Keep your intake of iodized salt to a bare minimum. Make sure that your total amount of iodine intake is within the recommended range—not too low or too high.

- **Tyrosine.** The other key ingredient in thyroid hormones is the amino acid tyrosine. Taking L-tyrosine alone or as a component as a nutritional supplement at a dosage of 250 to 500 mg daily may enhance thyroid function.

- **High potency multiple.** A deficiency of nutrients like zinc, copper, manganese and the vitamins A, B2, B3, B6, C and E could cause or contribute to hypothyroidism. Taking a high potency multiple vitamin and mineral supplement will ensure optimal levels of these important nutrients.

Herbal support for thyroid function

Two herbs long used in Ayurvedic medicine—*Withania somnifera* (ashwaganda) and *Commiphora mukul* (myrrh)—have shown an ability to boost thyroid function in experimental studies in animals. The two plants appear to exert synergistic effects. Specifically, withania extract appears to produce a significant increase in the level of thyroid hormone (T4) while commiphora extract enhances the conversion of T4 to the more potent T3 form. Both of the plants appear to boost thyroid function without influencing the release of the pituitary hormone TSH (thyroid stimulating hormone), indicating the herbs work directly on the thyroid gland and other body tissues to exert their effects. This action is quite important as 95 percent of all cases of hypothyroidism are not due to a problem with pituitary. The problem is with the thyroid gland itself and an impaired conversion of T4 into the more potent T3 in tissues outside the thyroid gland. The recommended dosages for thyroid support for the two herbs are:

- *Withania somnifera* root extract (standardized to contain 1.5 percent withanolides) 150 mg
- *Commiphora mukul* extract (standardized to contain 2.5 percent guggulsterones) 100 mg.

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