If you wake up in the morning complaining that you are as tired as when you went to sleep, if you’ve gained weight you find impossible to lose, if your hair is falling out, or if you’re feeling depressed, you might be suffering from low thyroid function.

Fatigue, weight gain, hair loss, and depression are the most common symptoms of hypothyroidism (low thyroid), but they are far from the only ones. The condition is loosely paired with a laundry list of symptoms as long as your arm, including such seemingly unrelated health issues as low body temperature, missing parts of eyebrows, carpal tunnel syndrome, and digestive problems, including constipation. Having just one symptom could indicate your thyroid is under functioning.

**Women at risk**

More than 13 million Americans have been diagnosed with hypothyroidism. Women are five to eight times more likely than men to suffer from hypothyroidism, and older women become more vulnerable to thyroid malfunction as they age. This may be because excess free estrogen, present during perimenopause, can suppress the action of the thyroid, while progesterone, which declines as a woman ages, enhances thyroid function. At least one in four postmenopausal women has subclinical hypothyroidism, that is, low thyroid function that does not show up on thyroid tests.

That’s why some thyroid specialists, like Sanford Siegal, co-author of *Is Your Thyroid Making You Fat?* (Warner Books, 2000), suggest trying a severely calorie-restricted diet (under 1,000 calories) for 28 days and, if significant weight loss doesn’t occur, considering the possibility that hypothyroidism is slowing your metabolism.
metabolism. For this, he prescribes natural thyroid replacement.

**What tests do you need?**
The most common blood tests to measure thyroid function are TSH (thyroid stimulating hormone, the hormone that stimulates your thyroid to produce more thyroid hormones) and T4 (the major thyroid hormone).

A high level of TSH indicates your hormone function is too low. A normal TSH range is between 0.35 and 5.5 mU/L. While the optimal level is 2, most doctors refuse to give thyroid medication unless the TSH result is much higher. The higher the result, the lower the thyroid function. Most doctors stop at the TSH and possibly the T4 test if you insist (optimal range is 4.5 to 12.0 uG/dL). There are other tests that provide much more information, including T3, Free T4, Free T3, Reverse T3, and anti-thyroid antibodies.

Some doctors will prescribe thyroid medications for those whose tests are inconclusive or even definitively indicate normal thyroid function, based on the theory that so many people have low thyroid function that doesn't register on common blood tests. Unfortunately, the majority of doctors will do cursory blood tests and summarily rule out hypothyroidism.

"Find a doctor who's willing to give you a low dose of thyroid hormone based on your symptoms, and see if you get relief," suggests Hyla Cass, MD, co-author of *8 Weeks to Vibrant Health* (McGraw-Hill, 2005).

**Natural treatments**

Synthetic thyroid hormone replacement is the standard medical treatment for hypothyroidism, but there are natural alternatives.

*A simple at-home thyroid test*

Have a regular thermometer, not digital, ready by your bed. Plan to awaken at precisely the same time every day for the next four days. When you first awaken, before getting out of bed, place the thermometer in your armpit. Leave it there for 10 minutes, then record your reading. If your four days of measurement show your average morning resting temperature is below 97.8 F (36.5 C), it is likely you have low thyroid function.

**Iodine.** Thyroid problems can be caused by iodine deficiency, despite its presence in table salt. Hypothyroidism can often be successfully treated with iodine and with supplements containing iodine, such as seaweed (kelp), bladderwrack, and bugleweed.

**L-tyrosine.** This non-essential amino acid is one of the building blocks of thyroid hormone as well as the brain chemicals dopamine, norepinephrine, and epinephrine and can help improve thyroid function, energy levels, and mood.

**Herbs, vitamins, and minerals.** Supplements known to improve thyroid function include ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*), guggul (*Commiphora mukul*), copper, pantothenic acid, and manganese.

**Prescription natural thyroid hormones.** If you don’t get relief from the above supplements, ask your doctor to prescribe natural thyroid hormone replacement.

It’s not necessary to soldier your way through the exhaustion, stubborn weight gain, and other trying symptoms of hypothyroidism. There are answers to your problems. However, you may need to become a crusader to get a doctor to recognize your problem and give you the treatment you need—and deserve.
