

# Underactive Thyroid Gland (Hypothyroidism)

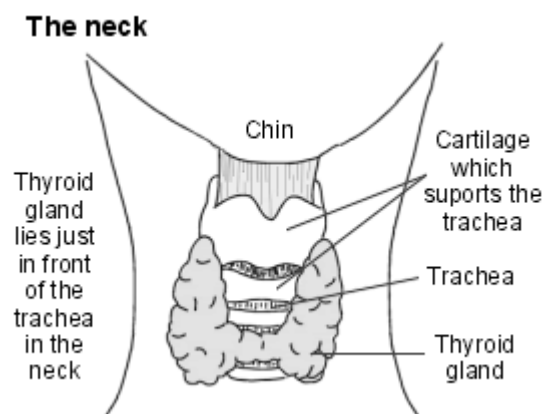
If you have an underactive thyroid gland, the condition is called hypothyroidism. In hypothyroidism, there is a reduced level of thyroid hormone (thyroxine) in the body. This can cause various symptoms, the most common being tiredness, weight gain, constipation, aches, dry skin, lifeless hair and feeling cold.

You have been sent the link to this leaflet because you have **subclinical hypothyroidism**. This means that your body is producing enough thyroid hormone but the gland is working a bit harder than normal. This means you have an increased risk of developing hypothyroidism in the future.

Your doctor will have advised repeat thyroid blood tests every so often to see if you do eventually develop hypothyroidism.

To find out more about hypothyroidism please read the leaflet below.

## What is hypothyroidism?



**Thyroxine** is a hormone made by the thyroid gland in the neck. It is carried round the body in the bloodstream. It helps to keep the body's functions (the metabolism) working at the correct pace. Many cells and tissues in the body need thyroxine to keep them going correctly.

**Underactive thyroid gland (hypothyroidism)** results from the thyroid gland being unable to make enough thyroxine, which causes many of the body's functions to slow down. Hypothyroidism may also occur if there is not enough thyroid gland left to make thyroxine - for example, after surgical removal or injury.

## What are the symptoms of hypothyroidism?

Many symptoms of having an underactive thyroid gland (hypothyroidism) can be caused by a low level of thyroxine. Basically, many body functions slow down. Not all symptoms develop in all cases.

Symptoms that commonly occur include:

- Tiredness
- Weight gain
- Constipation
- Aches
- Feeling cold
- Dry skin
- Lifeless hair

- Fluid retention
- Mental slowing
- Depression

Less common symptoms include:

- A hoarse voice.
- Irregular or heavy menstrual periods in women.
- Infertility.
- Loss of sex drive.
- Carpal tunnel syndrome (which causes pains and numbness in the hand).
- Memory loss or confusion in the elderly.

However, all these symptoms can be caused by other conditions and sometimes the diagnosis is not obvious. Symptoms usually develop slowly and gradually become worse over months or years as the level of thyroxine in the body gradually falls.

## Who develops hypothyroidism?

About 1 in 50 women and about 1 in 1,000 men develop an underactive thyroid gland (hypothyroidism) at some time in their lives. It most commonly develops in adult women and becomes more common with increasing age. However, it can occur at any age and can affect anyone.

## What causes hypothyroidism?

### **Autoimmune thyroiditis - the common cause in the UK**

The most common cause of having an underactive thyroid gland (hypothyroidism) is an autoimmune disease called autoimmune thyroiditis. The immune system normally makes antibodies to attack bacteria, viruses and other germs. If you have an autoimmune disease, the immune system makes antibodies against certain tissues of your body.

With autoimmune thyroiditis, you make antibodies that attach to your own thyroid gland, which affect the gland's function. The thyroid gland is then not able to make enough thyroxine and hypothyroidism gradually develops. It is thought that something triggers the immune system to make antibodies against the thyroid. The trigger is not known.

Some people with autoimmune thyroiditis also develop a swollen thyroid gland (goitre). Autoimmune thyroiditis with a goitre is called Hashimoto's disease. Also, people with autoimmune thyroiditis have a small increased risk of developing other autoimmune conditions such as vitiligo, pernicious anaemia, etc.

### **Surgery or radioactive treatment to the thyroid gland**

These are common causes of hypothyroidism in the UK, due to increasing use of these treatments for other thyroid conditions.

## How is hypothyroidism diagnosed?

A blood test can diagnose an underactive thyroid gland (hypothyroidism). A normal blood test will also rule it out if symptoms suggest that it may be a possible diagnosis. One or both of the following may be measured:

- **TSH.** This hormone is made in the pituitary gland. It is released into the bloodstream. It stimulates the thyroid gland to make thyroxine. If the level of thyroxine in the blood is low, then the pituitary releases more TSH to try to stimulate the thyroid gland to make more thyroxine. Therefore, a raised level of TSH means the thyroid gland is underactive and is not making enough thyroxine.
- **Thyroxine.** A low level of thyroxine confirms hypothyroidism.

## Subclinical hypothyroidism

Some people have a raised TSH level but have a normal thyroxine level. This means that you are making enough thyroxine but the thyroid gland is needing extra stimulation from TSH to make the required amount of thyroxine. In this situation you have an increased risk of developing hypothyroidism in the future. Your doctor may advise a repeat blood test every so often to see if you do eventually develop hypothyroidism.

## How is hypothyroidism treated?

The treatment of underactive thyroid gland (hypothyroidism) is to take [levothyroxine \(thyroxine\)](#) tablets each day. This replaces the thyroxine which your thyroid gland is not making. Most people feel much better soon after starting treatment.

## In summary

- Having an underactive thyroid gland (hypothyroidism) is common.
- Symptoms develop gradually. They may be confused with other conditions.
- Treatment with levothyroxine tablets is usually easy and effective.
- Treatment is usually for life.
- Have a blood test once a year if you take levothyroxine tablets, once your dose has become stabilised. Blood tests are needed more often when you first start treatment.

## Further help & information

[British Thyroid Association](#)

[British Thyroid Foundation](#)

[Thyroid UK](#)