

Part 1

LOW THYROID

Don't Slow Me Down

by Margy Squires

As I look back, I can see the signposts along the way that pointed to my low thyroid diagnosis. I don't know why I didn't see them then. Maybe I was just too tired? My turning point came when my sister, Ruth, underwent surgery for a thyroid goiter. Since low thyroid runs in families, I made one more attempt to convince the doctor.

The term “low thyroid” sounds like it would be a relatively harmless condition yet, given the function of the thyroid, it is not. A controversy exists in the medical community about whether a patient should be treated in the presence of a “normal” thyroid test if the history and symptoms warrant. Before advanced laboratory tests were available, a physician might try a patient on low dose thyroid to see if they felt better. Now many doctors want to treat based on a test result. Advocates for replacement say doctors should treat the patient, not the test. Arguers against say it may lead to further dysfunction of the gland by way of dependency. Who's right? Perhaps we should ask the estimated 11 million who are walking around undiagnosed with low thyroid how they feel.

Thyroid Symptoms

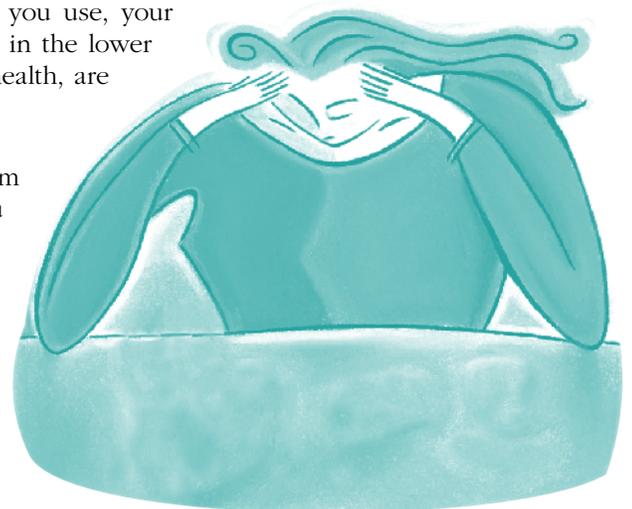
The common symptoms of low thyroid or hypothyroidism are fatigue, low body temperature and sensitivity to cold, gaining weight or difficulty losing weight, dry skin, headaches, recurrent infections, constipation, menstrual problems (in women) and low sex drive, brain fog and depression, just to mention the biggies. Low thyroid function has been implicated in inability to conceive and in miscarriages. Does this sound like a harmless condition?

What's going on inside? A slowed down metabolism may compromise your nutritional status since you can't break down foods (fats, carbs, protein) efficiently. You eat and your food just “sits” there and constipation is an issue. No matter how little you eat, you can't lose weight. Cholesterol and triglycerides are often elevated, leading to heart disease. Red blood cells appear anemic. Hypertension is another health risk, as is diabetes and hypoglycemia. Finally, bones may be thinning, weak or frail since the thyroid helps regulate calcium levels in the blood.

Mirror, Mirror

Since low thyroid affects mostly women, let's take a look in the thyroid mirror. Your face may be puffy from a sluggish lymph system causing fluid retention. You may be pale due to anemia, giving you a “tired” appearance. Your facial expression may be dull, which may be mistaken for depression. The outer third of your eyebrows are likely to be missing and your hair thin and lifeless. A slower metabolic rate may mean you've packed on an extra 25 pounds that you can't seem to diet off. Your fingernails are short as they're brittle and easily broken. If you look closely, you'll see crosswise grooves in the fingernails. No matter how much lotion you use, your skin feels parched, with a faint “scaly” texture. You may have swelling in the lower extremities. Like what you see in the mirror? Not exactly a picture of health, are you?

I look back on pictures taken before my thyroid diagnosis and am amazed at the resemblance. But if you don't know what to look for, you will not see the signs, just as I didn't. But why didn't the doctor? Like other disorders, the overlap of symptoms make it extremely difficult to tell what's causing what. Is your pain from osteoarthritis? Muscle tenderness from fibromyalgia? Fatigue from lack of sleep? Menstrual irregularities from perimenopause? Remember, many women are diagnosed in “middle age”. Plus, the process of hypothyroidism can



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Low Thyroid *continued*

occur gradually. The thyroid gland can store T4 hormone for weeks, converting it to T3 and releasing it as cells need it. That's why you may feel good for several days and then tired, then good and so on. As your cell metabolism slows down, so does your other systems. Getting a diagnosis may be as elusive as your energy.

As in fibromyalgia, you may end up with a “rule out” diagnosis as the doctor does tests, tests and more tests. Perhaps something will show up like an infection, anemia, low hormones, diabetes or any other number of disorders that might explain your symptoms. *What if that something doesn't show up in a test?* Millions of people are walking around with that “something”—a low thyroid. Even if the classic TSH (thyroid stimulating hormone) test came back “normal”, it could be anything but normal for you. The sad part is if you believe whatever the doctor tells you, even as you're dragging yourself out of his office, you may give up. Or you may think that maybe “it's all in my head”.

My own story began before David and I started TyH, when I was on staff at a well known medical clinic. We'd moved from Maine to Arizona in July—new job, new house, adapting to the 100 degree heat—wasn't it normal for me to be tired? The bizarre part, though, was my new intolerance of the cold, but then everything was air conditioned, I reasoned. Still, time passed but the fatigue did not. I reached a point when I just wanted to scream in frustration at any doctor who would listen: *“I have lived in this body longer than you and I am telling you, it's not normal for ME to feel this way! Please, LISTEN to me!”* Although I did not do that, my desperation to feel like myself again did make me bolder than usual. The cardiologist I worked for had an office right next to an endocrinologist, a doctor who specializes in the thyroid. We often spoke in passing. When I learned about my sister, I

stopped him in the hallway and asked if I had a goiter. He put his hands around the front of my throat and told me to swallow. “Yes,” he said. “Now make an appointment to see me the proper way”.

This story will be continued. I leave you with a quote from Dr. Richard Shames: “Although extremely common, low thyroid is largely an unsuspected illness. Even when suspected, it is frequently undiagnosed. When it is diagnosed, it often goes untreated. When it is treated, it is seldom treated optimally.” In Part 2, I'll share how to get the right tests to

check your thyroid function, how to help your doctor interpret those tests and later explain treatment options. If you're anxious and don't want to wait until then, I suggest you pick up a copy of *Thyroid Power* at your local bookstore, written by Richard L. Shames, M.D. and his wife, Karilee Halo Shames, R.N., Ph.D. who has low thyroid (Quill Publishing).

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