

boost your energy and drop kilos

*** ONE IN FIVE WOMEN WILL DEVELOP AN UNDERACTIVE THYROID, BUT MANY DOCTORS MISS THE WARNING SIGNS. TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR HEALTH WITH THESE TIPS.**

BY MELISSA DALY PHOTOGRAPHY BY KELVIN CUFF


Like most university students, Emily Seitz was juggling a full schedule of classes, activities and social events. But in the middle of her junior year, she became overwhelmed by her normal routine. She rarely went out with her friends and barely managed to stay on top of simple tasks like paying her rent. “I was exhausted all the time. More than once, I climbed into bed at 6pm and slept until the next morning,” says Emily, now a 30-year-old retail analyst living in New York City. “And even though my eating habits had not changed, I kept gaining weight.” At first, she attributed it to the winter blues. But then, a routine test at her annual check-up showed something different: hypothyroidism, or an underactive thyroid.

The thyroid is a butterfly-shaped gland in the neck which pumps out hormones that impact how smoothly and quickly your body can run when converting calories to energy, recalling a memory, or contracting your heart muscle, among other things. Low levels of these hormones can cause a laundry list of health problems, including fatigue, weight gain, muscle and joint pain, dry skin and hair, forgetfulness, and even drastic mood swings.

Emily’s doctor prescribed a thyroid hormone-replacement pill, and within a few weeks, her energy levels and outlook on life had improved — and she started dropping the kilos. But most women aren’t diagnosed as easily. The vast majority of all thyroid disorders — up to 13 million cases — go undetected, according to a recent study in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*. Like Emily, many women simply brush off the symptoms, assuming that excessive fatigue is a result of their hectic lifestyles. To complicate matters, the medical community isn’t in sync about when to treat the disease.

WHO NEEDS TO BE TESTED

Because it’s so difficult to diagnose hypothyroidism based on physical signs, doctors must rely on a blood test that measures the amount of thyroid-stimulating hormone, or TSH, in the body. The definition of hypothyroidism is generally a TSH level of 10 or more, but unfortunately, most cases fall into a grey area called “subclinical hypothyroidism” — a level between three and 10. “Some doctors aren’t convinced that treating subclinical cases has any benefit,” says Dr Carol Greenlee, an endocrinologist in Atlanta

A woman with dark hair, wearing a purple halter-neck top and a teal skirt, is captured in a dynamic pose as if running or jumping down a set of concrete stairs. She is wearing white peep-toe wedge heels. The background features a modern building with a glass and metal structure, lush green tropical plants, and a clear sky. The overall mood is energetic and vibrant.

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and chair of the clinical affairs committee of the American Thyroid Association (ATA). One worry is that giving medication to someone who doesn't need it could actually lead to symptoms of hyperthyroidism, or an overactive thyroid (see "The Other Thyroid Disorder" on the next page).

With so much controversy surrounding borderline hypothyroidism, it's crucial that women act as their own advocates, says Dr Greenlee. So how do you know if your thyroid is to blame for your muscle pain or lapse in memory rather than, say, a tough workout or a chaotic week? "There are symptoms which may signal that you have the condition or are likely to get it," she says. Talk to your doctor about getting a TSH test if you have any of these six risk factors.

• **You haven't been feeling like yourself lately**

It's easy to write off feeling chilly all the time or forgetting where you left your keys. But if you've noticed a significant change in your mood or energy levels — and it's lasted for more than two months — get tested and ask your physician whether your results fall in the subclinical category.

• **You've plucked out grey hair since before you turned 30**

Going grey at an early age, even if it's just a stray hair or two, is a sign that you have a higher risk of contracting an autoimmune disorder like Hashimoto's thyroiditis — the most common thyroid disease in the US. The condition, which causes your immune system to attack the thyroid, is treated with thyroid hormone-replacement pills. Take note if any of your relatives had salt-and-pepper hair when they were young or if they suffered from an autoimmune disorder such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, or multiple sclerosis.

• **You have high cholesterol or blood pressure**

"If there's a shortage of thyroid hormones in the body, the heart muscle contracts more slowly and the blood vessels become stiffer, which could lead to cardiovascular problems," explains Dr Greenlee. Your body also metabolises cholesterol less efficiently, so it isn't cleared from your blood vessels

as quickly. "Many doctors' first reaction is to prescribe blood pressure — or cholesterol-lowering medicines," she says, "instead of pausing to consider whether hypothyroidism is the underlying culprit."

• **You've switched birth control pills because of side effects** Does the Pill make you feel bloated and exhausted? It may be a red flag. Some endocrinologists suspect that the hormones in oral contraceptives — oestrogen and progesterone — increase the production of thyroid-binding proteins. As a result, lower levels of thyroid hormones

circulate through your body and that may trigger hypothyroidism. "If you've tried three brands of the Pill and each makes you feel fatigued or depressed, you may have low-thyroid function," says Dr Ken Blanchard, a US-based endocrinologist and author of *What Your Doctor May Not Tell You About Hypothyroidism*.

• **You've had trouble getting pregnant**

"Left untreated, hypothyroidism can affect the regularity of your menstrual cycle and cause

decreased fertility, as well as raise your risk of having a miscarriage," says Dr Richard Hellman, president of the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists. In fact, experts agree that all women who are trying to conceive should get tested. A study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* shows that mothers with untreated thyroid disorders gave birth to babies with lower IQs than those born to women with normal thyroid function. Once you become pregnant, ask your physician to test you again: Oestrogen and progesterone surge during pregnancy, which can trigger hypothyroidism, says Dr Hellman.

• **You're 35 or older** Even if you don't have a family history of thyroid problems, you may still want to get screened: Researchers at the University of Colorado found that up to 21 per cent of women develop a thyroid condition sometime during their lives. That's why the ATA and many endocrinologists recommend getting tested every three to five years, starting at age 35.

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YOUR THYROID-PROTECTION PLAN

If you're diagnosed with hypothyroidism, you'll be prescribed a drug containing synthetic thyroid hormones that you'll likely have to take for life. But if your TSH level is between three and five, your doctor may be reluctant to prescribe drugs. A number of studies, however, show that not treating mild cases may have a serious impact over the long haul: Scientists at the University of California, San Francisco, recently found that people with a TSH level of three to 10 were twice as likely to have a heart attack as those with levels below three.

Manage your condition better or even ward it off completely with these six easy lifestyle changes.

- **Increase your iodine intake** Found in iodised salt and seafood, this trace mineral is required for thyroid hormone production. You need about 150 micrograms (mcg) a day, the amount in about a half teaspoon of iodised salt (note that sea salt and the salt in processed foods are not iodised).

- **Stock up on selenium** "The body needs this mineral to produce thyroid hormones," says Dr Richard Shames, a US-based thyroid expert. Recent studies also show that it may reduce levels of thyroid-attacking antibodies, the kind your body produces if you have an auto-immune disorder. Aim to get 55mcg of selenium a day from foods like Brazil nuts, tuna or rice.

- **Go easy on soya** The isoflavones in soya can interfere with your body's production and use of thyroid hormones. Dr Shames recommends that women with a family history of thyroid disorders consume less than 50mg of soya isoflavones daily. A cup of soya milk contains 20 to 35mg, while a serving of soya chips has between 15 and 25mg.

- **Buy bottled water** A recent review by the National Research Council found that the amount

of fluoride in drinking water may hinder thyroid function. If you suffer from subclinical hypothyroidism and your water supply is fluoridated, drink more bottled water or buy a special fluoridated water-filtration system.

- **Give your Blackberry a break** "Stress affects the body's production of steroids, which can hamper the secretion of thyroid-stimulating hormone," says US-based endocrinologist Dr James Rone. As a result, chronic anxiety may increase your chances of developing a thyroid disorder.

- **Order salmon** "The omega-3 fatty acids found in fish are important for the maintenance of cell membranes, which help transport thyroid hormones in the body," says Dr Shames. He advises eating a 85g serving of fatty fish, such as salmon or mackerel twice a week, or take fish-oil supplements.



*** the other thyroid disorder** More than two million Americans have hyperthyroidism, meaning that the thyroid pumps too much hormones. As a result, body functions speed up, causing anxiety, sudden weight loss, or insomnia. "The condition is caused by an autoimmune disorder called Graves' disease," says Dr James Rone. If you have any of these symptoms for at least two months, request a TSH test; a score of less than 0.1 can indicate hyperthyroidism. Your doctor can prescribe an anti-thyroid medication to slow the gland's production of hormones, but more severe cases require treatment with radioactive iodine. The medicine destroys cells in your thyroid without harming other parts of the body, but with a side effect: Most people will develop hypothyroidism within a few months and must take synthetic thyroid hormone pills to achieve normal thyroid function.