

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HYPERTHYROIDISM

In the Clinic
Annals of Internal Medicine

What Is Hyperthyroidism?

The thyroid gland is a small gland in the front of your neck. It makes hormones that control how the body uses energy. Hyperthyroidism develops when the thyroid gland makes more thyroid hormone than your body needs. There can be several causes, including:

- Graves disease (an autoimmune disorder, and the most common cause)
- Multiple nodules, or lumps, on the thyroid; this is known as toxic nodular goiter
- A single, toxic lump on the thyroid; this is called toxic adenoma
- Thyroiditis, which is an inflammation of the thyroid gland that causes stored hormones to leak into the body

What Are Common Symptoms?

- Weight loss
- Nervousness or anxiety
- Feeling too hot and/or excessive sweating
- Shortness of breath
- Rapid heartbeat
- Trembling hands
- Frequent bowel movements
- Tiredness
- Changes in mood
- Eye irritation or discomfort

Sometimes, people with hyperthyroidism have no symptoms. Elderly persons may have milder symptoms that include tiredness, depression, weight loss, and rapid heartbeat.

Sometimes, people have sudden onset of severe symptoms like high fever, irregular heartbeat, shortness of breath, chest pain, or stomach pain. Patients with severe symptoms should go to the hospital right away.

Am I at Risk?

Hyperthyroidism is more common in women than in men, especially in those older than 50 years. You may also be at higher risk if you have any of the following:

- A goiter (swelling of the thyroid gland in the front of your neck)
- Certain medical conditions, such as type 1 diabetes or other autoimmune disorders
- A family history of thyroid disorder
- Use of certain medications

How Is It Diagnosed?

- Your doctor will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. The physical examination will include feeling your neck, where the thyroid gland is.
- You will have blood tests to measure your thyroid hormone levels.
- Your doctor may order a test that measures the ability of the thyroid gland to collect



iodine (an RAIU, or radioactive iodine uptake test) and a thyroid scan to identify what is causing your hyperthyroidism.

- Your doctor may want to obtain an ultrasound of your thyroid and additional blood testing if the cause is unclear or if you are pregnant or breastfeeding.

How Is It Treated?

Treatment depends on the cause and severity of the hyperthyroidism as well as your age, physical condition, and preferences.

- Beta-blockers can help control your symptoms, including rapid heartbeat, tremors, anxiety, and heat intolerance. Symptoms usually get better very soon after these medicines are started.
- Medications called antithyroid drugs may be used to reduce the amount of hormone your thyroid gland makes.
- Radiation to destroy the thyroid, called radioactive iodine ablation, is a permanent treatment.
- The thyroid may be removed surgically.

Talk to your doctor about the benefits and risks of these options and your personal preference. Until your hyperthyroidism is under control, you should avoid strenuous physical activity; reduce or eliminate caffeine; stop smoking; avoid products containing iodine, like kelp, iodine supplements, and iodinated contrast agents; and avoid biotin supplements.

Questions for My Doctor

- Do I need to take medicine to treat my hyperthyroidism?
- How long will I have to take the medicine?
- Will I need surgery?
- Are there risks or side effects from the treatment?
- How often should I have follow-up visits and blood testing?
- Will I need to see any other doctors?

For More Information



American Thyroid Association
www.thyroid.org/hyperthyroidism

Medline Plus
<https://medlineplus.gov/hyperthyroidism.html>