

# When our thyroid malfunctions

Senior consultant endocrinologist Dr Tay Tunn Lin explains what happens when the hormone-regulating gland is out of sync



Symptoms of hyperthyroidism include heart palpitations, diarrhoea, anxiety and irritability, but the disorder is often treatable. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

One of the most common endocrine disorders affects the thyroid, a gland at the base of the neck which secretes hormones to regulate metabolism. A person may get hyperthyroidism, an excess of thyroid hormones, or hypothyroidism – insufficient production of thyroid hormones.

Dr Tay Tunn Lin from Livingstone Endocrine, Diabetes & Thyroid Clinic explains what happens when you have thyroid disorder and how you can get it treated.

## Q Who is more prone to getting thyroid disorder?

Thyroid disorders tend to be hereditary, and women are more likely to be affected than men.

In hyperthyroidism, those between the ages of 20 to 40 are frequently affected, while hypothyroidism tends to affect those above 60. However, both conditions can occur in any age group.

Some women may also develop hypothyroidism after pregnancy.

Another condition that is quite common is thyroid nodules or lumps, which can be found in 20 to 60 per cent of the population. The majority of these nodules are non-cancerous.

## Q How do you know if you have thyroid disorder?

Symptoms of hyperthyroidism include heart palpitations, tremors, diarrhoea, irregular periods, excessive sweating, increased appetite, weight loss, anxiety and irritability, and insomnia.

If left untreated, it can lead to a serious condition called thyroid storm. This causes confusion, heart failure, kidney failure, liver failure, high fever and even death.

For hypothyroidism, metabolism slows and symptoms include weight gain, constipation, feeling cold easily, lethargy, heavy periods and dry skin. In severe cases, patients can go into a coma and have heart failure.

Small thyroid nodules usually do not cause

symptoms. Larger nodules can, however, be seen as a swelling in the lower part of the neck where the thyroid is. Most are painless.

## Q How does the doctor diagnose you for thyroid disorder?

Your doctor will perform a physical examination of the neck, check for hand tremors, sweaty palms and eye abnormalities.

But a blood test for hormone levels is the most effective way to diagnose thyroid disorders.

An ultrasound of the thyroid may be done to check for any thyroid nodule or an enlarged thyroid gland.

For large thyroid nodules, a biopsy may be needed to ensure that they are not cancerous.

## Q I've just been diagnosed with thyroid disorder. What are the treatment options?

For both hyperthyroidism and hypothyroidism, medication will help to normalise hormone levels.

The dosage will be adjusted based on the patient's response over time. Symptoms will improve once hormone levels stabilise.

It is important to take your medications as prescribed and do not stop taking them unless advised by your doctor.

Specialised treatment known as radioactive iodine is also an option for some hyperthyroid patients if medications are not effective.

Some patients with large thyroid nodules which hinder swallowing or breathing may need surgery to remove the thyroid gland.



### Dr Tay Tunn Lin

Senior consultant endocrinologist  
Livingstone Endocrine, Diabetes & Thyroid Clinic  
Mount Alvernia Hospital  
Medical Centre A #06-07