

The Thyroid: Little Gland Causing Big Weight Problems



Losing weight is challenging, but possible, when you have hypothyroidism.

Would you know if your thyroid gland slowed its production of thyroid hormone? The symptoms of decreased thyroid hormone synthesis, known as hypothyroidism, are hard to spot. About 10 million Americans have thyroid disease and many others are undiagnosed, under-diagnosed, or under-treated. Many times the symptoms—including weakness and fatigue, weight gain, persistent constipation, or thinning hair—are

often mistaken as other illnesses or simply the progression of aging, hence its nickname by physicians as “the great mimicker”.

The thyroid is a small, butterfly-shaped gland that sits at the base of the front of your neck and plays a key role in the endocrine system, which creates, distributes, and regulates hormones in the body. The hormones produced by the thyroid gland, T3 and T4, regulate the body’s metabolism by providing cells with energy they need to function. When your thyroid does not produce enough of these hormones, the balance of chemical reactions in your body can be upset and many times results in a slowed metabolism.

The clinical symptoms of hypothyroidism are directly related to this metabolic disturbance—most notably being weight gain. If levels of thyroid hormones are low, you burn fewer calories per day. An underactive thyroid makes every calorie count more, sometimes double. It makes losing weight a slower and more challenging process.

Here are six things to consider if attempting a weight management program when you have an underactive thyroid:

1. See your physician

If you are experiencing the symptoms of hypothyroidism, it’s essential to get proper treatment from your physician. Diagnosis through a blood test will determine if synthetic thyroid hormones are needed. It’s important to note that taking the thyroid hormones will help normalize hormone levels, but they won’t necessarily cause you to lose weight. Diet and lifestyle changes must still be followed to help shed the pounds (more about this below).

2. Avoid foods that hinder thyroid hormone absorption

When taking thyroid hormones, it’s important to avoid certain foods and nutrients that can interfere with absorption.

For example, dietary calcium or iron can inhibit thyroid hormone absorption. For this reason, many doctors recommend taking thyroid medication immediately upon rising and two to three hours apart from consuming calcium- or iron-containing foods. Be sure to do your research as some calcium- and iron-containing foods and supplements may be surprising such as antacids, calcium-fortified orange juice, and multivitamins.

It's also important to avoid foods that can interfere with thyroid function, which are designated as goitrogenic foods. Common goitrogenic foods include non-fermented soy foods, legumes such as lima beans, and raw cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts. Preparation methods, such as cooking or fermentation, reduce the amount of goitrogens in these foods.

2. Eat balanced meals with quality protein

The greatest contributor to basal metabolic rate (BMR)—the rate that your body burns calories—is muscle tissue. Even when you are at rest (such as sleeping), muscle requires energy to rebuild and restore. For this reason, it's beneficial to preserve muscle when you're trying to lose weight.

Meals higher in protein compared to other macronutrients (carbohydrates and fats) have shown to help maintain muscle mass resulting in a higher BMR, [faster metabolism](#), and greater energy expenditure (1;2). Additionally, the digestion and absorption of protein—known as the thermic effect of food—requires more calories than both fat and carbohydrate combined (2).

3. Choose calories wisely

When trying to lose weight, every calorie counts. This is even more emphasized when dealing with a sluggish metabolism. It's important to limit “empty” calories such as sugary drinks, white-flour pastas and breads, and other sources of refined carbohydrates that can quickly spike blood sugar and leave you feeling hungry and fatigued.

Instead of refined carbohydrates, choose portion-controlled meals that are higher in dietary fiber to help satisfy your appetite and keep you feeling fuller, longer. In addition to curbing cravings, a high-fiber diet can help avoid hypothyroidism-induced constipation as dietary fiber is an important bulking agent for solidifying and softening stools.

4. Get moving, even if it is only for a short time

The fatigue that often accompanies hypothyroidism can hamper motivation to exercise; however, physical activity—especially resistance training— is a major contributor to metabolic stimulation and muscle growth, which can fuel weight loss.

If time and motivation to exercise are challenging, try [high-intensity interval training \(HIT\)](#). HIT involves alternating intense bouts of exercise ranging from 30 seconds to several minutes with recovery periods spanning one to five minutes. The benefits of HIT have been shown to outweigh longer, continuous exercise when it comes to improving body composition and metabolic health (3).

5. Make sure you are getting sufficient vitamins and minerals daily

A diet supplying sufficient amounts of minerals such as iodine and selenium is important for thyroid health. Sources of iodine include iodized salt and sea vegetables such as kelp. It may seem like you would be getting enough iodine from a typical salty Western diet; however, many processed foods do not use iodized salt. Sources of selenium include animal products, seafood, dairy, and Brazil nuts. Also, you can ensure you are receiving sufficient amounts through supplementation.

In addition to these minerals, evidence has been showing that vitamin D is particularly important for those with thyroid problems and other autoimmune disorders. Those with thyroid disease may be at greater risk for low vitamin D levels (4,5). Because of the many roles [vitamin D](#) plays in the body—from bone health to brain health—it's important to be sure you are getting enough through your diet, supplementation, or by soaking up the sun's UVB rays. If you choose the latter, be sure to [practice safe sun exposure](#).

6. Get enough quality shut-eye

While getting enough quality sleep is important for anyone attempting to lose weight, it's especially important for those with hypothyroidism. Too often, people who are sleep-deprived try to increase levels of alertness by eating and those foods tend to be high-calorie options. This cycle of fatigue and self-medicating with unhealthy foods can be disastrous for your waist line and your health.

In addition to feeling tired and making bad food choices, sleep deprivation can decrease insulin sensitivity and essentially cause a [metabolic meltdown](#). On average, adults need seven to nine hours of sleep each night. So make sure you are getting enough horizontal time every night.

References:

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