

When Good Thyroids Go Bad...

While enjoying the beautiful view of the snow-capped North Shore Mountains from the second floor of the Lynn Valley Library, I started to think about the frequency at which I was seeing thyroid conditions in practice. It's no wonder: toxins in the air we breathe, in the lotions we slather on our skin, in the unfiltered water we drink, and in the pesticides sprayed on the produce we consume all disrupt thyroid function. Ask yourself:

- Are you constantly chilly?
- Tend towards constipation?
- Feel lethargic often?
- Tire easily?
- Have difficulty losing weight?
- Dry skin?

If those descriptors strike a chord, consider your thyroid function may be suboptimal. The thyroid gland is the "master control gland" that is located at the base of your throat. It has its hand in *all functions of the body* as it controls metabolism of every single one of our cells.

When the thyroid is overactive, it's termed hyperthyroidism and the resulting symptoms are that of rapid metabolism: hot body temperature, high blood pressure, fast pulse, racing thoughts, nervousness, insomnia, diarrhea or loose stool and difficulty putting on weight (wouldn't that be nice!). Now, don't confuse these symptoms with the resulting temporary buzz from a triple shot of espresso from our neighborhood Wave's Coffee House!

More common than hyperthyroidism is *hypothyroidism*, or an underactive thyroid. Some common hypothyroid symptoms are:

- Low body temperature
- Slow pulse
- Dry skin
- Weight gain
- Constipation
- Frequent headaches
- Dry, thinning hair
- Fatigue and muscle weakness
- Anemia
- Depression, memory loss
- High cholesterol

The most common cause of hypothyroidism in North America is an autoimmune attack on the thyroid gland, Hashimoto's disease. We can see this on lab tests as an increase in antibodies that are attacking our vital gland. When autoimmunity is to blame, naturopathic doctors will not only support the thyroid gland but will use nutritional and supplemental support such as vitamin D, fish oil and sterols and sterolins (plant compounds) to modulate the hyperactive immune system and "quench the fire". In many cases hypothyroidism can be well controlled with diet, lifestyle and supplements.

Simple steps you can do now to keep your thyroid functioning optimally:

1. Detox regularly. The liver plays a major role in the conversion of inactive thyroid hormone (T4) to active thyroid hormone (T3) and also metabolizes other hormones such as estrogen and cortisol. High estrogen and cortisol can impede thyroid function. Accessibility to hiking trails is almost unlimited in Lynn Valley's backyard – so, as the weather warms, take advantage of nature and plan frequent outdoor physical activities to “sweat it out”.
2. Eat seaweed. Dried, seasoned seaweed can be added to soups and salads and ensures the body gets its daily dose of iodine, a nutrient required in thyroid hormone production.
3. Remove food sensitivities. Foods such as dairy and wheat that we eat on a regular (shall I say *constant*) basis tend to cause immune reactions over time. When the immune system is unregulated and inappropriately mounting an attack against foods like dairy and wheat, it is more likely to turn the tables and start attacking self-tissue as well. A susceptible tissue is the thyroid gland. Studies have linked gluten intolerance with Hashimoto's disease, and patients with an autoimmune thyroid condition will often dramatically improve on a gluten-free diet.
4. Ensure you're getting the proper nutrients through a healthy diet. In particular, selenium, iron and zinc are essential cofactors in thyroid function. A free online program such as www.FitDay.com is an excellent tool to input several days' worth of meals and find out how your nutrient status stacks up.

To re-create your happiest, healthiest self, ensure you're doing everything you can to support a healthy thyroid!

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