

# Hypothyroidism

## What is it?

Hypothyroidism, also known as "underactive thyroid disease," is a common adult condition of the thyroid, a gland that regulates the body's energy. It occurs when the thyroid gland stops producing enough of the thyroid hormones T3 and T4. When the thyroid does not produce enough hormone, it slows down the body's metabolism and the gland itself shrinks as its cells are destroyed by the subtle effect in the patient's immune system. The gland is shaped like a bow tie wrapped around the windpipe at the base of the throat.

## What are its common causes?

Thyroiditis and autoimmune disorder which runs in families (this is when the body produces antibodies that attack and damage the thyroid permanently)

Certain types of thyroid inflammation or viral infection

Complications of thyroid surgery

A congenital thyroid defect (occurs in 1 in 5,000 babies)

Treatments for hyperthyroidism (these treatments destroy part of the gland and the remaining tissue may not produce sufficient hormones)

## What are its symptoms?

Symptoms may initially go unnoticed because they often mimic those of normal aging and may develop slowly over months and years. Symptoms include:

Constant tiredness and lack of energy

Forgetfulness

Weight gain

Inability to keep warm

Dry skin and hair

Hair loss or hair coarsening

Hoarseness of the voice

Heavy menstrual period in women

## Who suffers?

About 11 million Americans, particularly women over 50

By age 60, an estimated 17 percent of women and 9 percent of men

About one in 71 women over age 50 goes undiagnosed

## How is it diagnosed?

Your internist can screen for hypothyroidism with a simple blood test for Thyroid-Stimulating Hormone (TSH). Guidelines from the American College of Physicians (ACP) recommend hypothyroid screening for women over 50.\*\*

## How is it treated?

Hypothyroidism is easily treated with a daily pill containing a synthetic thyroid hormone, usually for life (unless hypothyroidism case is short-term).

## Annals of Internal Medicine Patient Summaries

Search for **hypothyroidism** in ACP's [Annals of Internal Medicine Patient Summaries](#). *Annals of Internal Medicine* is the leading peer-reviewed internal medicine clinical journal.

### More on Hypothyroidism from *Annals of Internal Medicine*:

\*\*Clinical Guideline, Part I -- "[Screening for Thyroid Disease: An Update](#)" published in *Annals of Internal Medicine* July 15, 1998. ACP has developed clinical guidelines for physicians for more than 20 years based on evidence collected in standard clinical trials.