What is the thyroid gland and why should I be concerned about it?
The thyroid gland is a small butterfly-shaped gland in your neck. It wraps around the windpipe just below the Adam's apple. We usually don't give it much thought, but its importance in keeping us healthy cannot be overstated. In fact, the thyroid gland can influence the health and normal functioning of almost every organ, every tissue, and every cell in our bodies.

How does it work?
The thyroid gland takes iodine, (found in the food you eat), from the body to produce thyroid hormones. These hormones control the body's metabolism and regulate the body's use of energy. It affects heart rate, brain function, body temperature, cholesterol level, body weight, energy level, muscle strength, skin condition, vision, menstruation, digestion and bowel movements, mental state, and many other conditions. Despite its importance to our health, the thyroid and its disorders are not widely understood by the general public.

What is thyroid disease?
Approximately 13 million Americans have thyroid problems and as many as half are undiagnosed. It is more common in women than in men and occurs most often in women over the age of 40. The most common type of thyroid diseases are hypothyroidism and hyperthyroidism. Unfortunately, they often go undiagnosed because the symptoms of these disorders are often confused with common problems associated with aging, menopause, or stress. If left untreated, thyroid disorders can affect the cardiovascular system, reproductive system, and major organs.

What is Hypothyroidism?
Hypothyroidism is the most common thyroid disorder, affecting 11 million Americans, primarily women and the elderly. Hypothyroidism occurs when the thyroid becomes underactive and does not produce enough thyroid hormones. Symptoms may include: sluggishness and fatigue, weight gain, muscle pain, feeling cold, depression, forgetfulness, dryness of hair, skin and nails, hoarse voice, constipation, increased menstrual flow. The most common cause of hypothyroidism is Hashimoto's thyroiditis, an autoimmune disease in which the body attacks the thyroid and keeps it from producing enough thyroid hormones. Hypothyroidism can also be caused by acute thyroiditis, a virus that attacks and may destroy a portion of the thyroid gland and by surgical removal of part or all of the thyroid gland due to cancerous nodules or tumors.

What is Hyperthyroidism?
Hyperthyroidism is a less common thyroid disorder affecting approximately one million Americans and is more likely to affect women between the ages of 30 and 50. Hyperthyroidism occurs when the thyroid produces too much thyroid hormone and gives the body an abnormal supply of energy. Symptoms may include nervousness, irritability, shaky hands, sleep problems, rapid or irregular heartbeat, elevated body temperature, frequent bowel movements, increased perspiration, hair loss, weight loss, decreased menstruation, vision changes, and weak leg muscles. Grave’s Disease is the most common form of hyperthyroidism in which an autoimmune response by the body creates antibodies against the thyroid, causing it to overproduce hormones.

Are there any other types of thyroid disorders?
Sometimes the thyroid gland will develop lumps of tissue called nodules. One or many nodules may occur and there is no determined cause. Most nodules are benign and cause no problems, but occasionally a nodule may become cancerous. A goiter is an enlargement of the thyroid gland. A goiter can occur with any of the previously discussed thyroid disorders. Large goiters may interfere with breathing or swallowing, or may become cancerous.
How are thyroid disorders diagnosed?
Symptoms of thyroid disorders, described above, should be reported to your physician. The American Medical Women’s Association reports that 65% of women do not know what thyroid disorders are. You should inform your physician if there is a family history of thyroid problems because it may be hereditary. During routine physical exams, your physician should examine your neck and thyroid gland and feel for any enlargement or nodules. A simple blood test can measure the amount of thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH) in your bloodstream. This will tell the physician if your thyroid is producing too much or too little hormone, resulting in treatment even before the onset of symptoms.

How are thyroid disorders treated?
The goal for treating thyroid disorders is to restore the body's normal blood levels of thyroid hormone. With hypothyroidism, a daily thyroid hormone pill is prescribed to supplement the body's missing hormone supply. A TSH test is done yearly to monitor the thyroid hormone levels in your blood, and it is likely that the medication will have to be taken for life. Thyroid hormone pills are natural and if taken as directed, usually cause no problems.

Treatment of hyperthyroidism is more complex and requires a plan for long-term care. The goal is to reduce the excess amount of thyroid hormone being produced. One method of treatment is antithyroid drug therapy, which slows the hormone production. Another treatment method is radioactive iodine therapy in which radioactive iodine is used to destroy some of the thyroid cells and reduce the size of the thyroid, rendering it ineffective. The iodine does not affect other parts of the body. Daily thyroid hormone pills may be needed to bring hormone levels back to normal. Careful lifetime management is required to insure the proper levels of thyroid replacement medication. In rare cases of hyperthyroidism, it may be necessary to surgically remove the thyroid gland.

The treatment of nodules and goiter depends on the severity of the condition. If the condition is benign, medication may be used to control the growth of the nodules. However, if nodules or goiter become very large, or become cancerous, a surgical procedure is necessary. Surgery may involve part of the gland (lobectomy) or the entire gland (thyroidectomy). After surgery, thyroid hormone pills must be taken to maintain normal thyroid hormone levels in your body. Once your thyroid problems are under control, you can go back to doing the things you normally do. If you are taking thyroid pills, you must remember to take one daily, as instructed, and see your physician regularly for checkups.

For more information:
For more information about thyroid disorders, you may contact the following organizations:
Office of Scientific and Health Information (301) 496-3583
The National Women's Health Information Center (800) 994-WOMAN
It is important to know about and be able to recognize symptoms of thyroid disorders so that they may be diagnosed and treated as soon as possible. With early treatment, anyone can live a normal, healthy life. If you have concerns about family history or have symptoms of thyroid problems, be sure to discuss them with your physician.

This information is provided for educational purposes only and is not a substitute for sound medical judgment. If you have any questions or concerns, you should discuss them with your physician.

Resources:
American Medical Women's Association
Thyroid Foundation of America

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