

Too much or too little?

Keith Souter explains the enigma of the thyroid gland and its problems

The thyroid gland is one of the most important glands in the body with a far-reaching influence. It is one of the endocrine, hormone-producing, organs and it basically controls the rate at which the body's various organs and systems function. It has an effect on immunity, energy levels, circulation, sugar regulation and is the overall controller of growth and development, and of metabolism throughout the body. More than that, however, it has an important part to play in mood.

A shield

The name thyroid comes from the Greek *thyreo-eides*, the name from the Ancient Greek "door-shaped" battle shield, which had a notch for the chin, from *thyra*, meaning door. The thyroid cartilage is such a shape and forms the Adam's apple prominence on the front of the neck. The thyroid gland is a butterfly-shaped gland, the two lobes of which lie against the lower half of the thyroid cartilage. The two lobes are united by an isthmus of tissue.

Essentially, the thyroid gland makes the thyroid hormones, thyroxine and triiodothyronine (respectively referred to as T₄ and T₃) and another called calcitonin, which has an effect on calcium metabolism. Ninety per cent of the body's iodine is contained in the thyroid gland in organic form. This iodine is needed in order to manufacture the thyroid hormones.

The thyroid hormones are the mediators of innumerable chemical reactions within the body. This is what we mean when we talk about metabolism; basically the thyroid, through the action of its hormones, is the regulator of the rate at which the body functions.

Feedback loop

The thyroid hormones function via a feedback loop. The hypothalamus, a collection of specialised cells within the brain, is affected by the circulating levels of the thyroid hormones. If the level is lower than it should be, then it pumps out a hormone that controls the pituitary gland, at the base of the brain. This responds by producing Thyroid Stimulating Hormone (TSH), which causes the thyroid to produce more thyroxine until it achieves adequate levels. Once those levels are attained, then a negative feedback ceases further production. Tapping into this feedback loop is the way in which we can biochemically test for over- or under-activity of the gland. Essentially, we find out if there is too much or too little.

Tadpoles into frogs

Let me take you away from human physiology for a moment and consider your common or garden pond and its population of frogs' spawn. How wonderful it is to see those jelly-like masses develop into little wriggling tadpoles. Remember the wonder with which you watched them during your childhood, as they slowly transformed into frogs? You were witnessing the metamorphosis of a creature from one life stage to another. And it is a profound change because the larval tadpole hatches from the egg equipped by nature to live its life in the water. It is an herbivorous water-dweller with gills. As it develops, however, it grows limbs, lungs and when it emerges from the water as an adult frog, it has become an air-breathing carnivore.

Frogs are amphibians and the whole class to which they belong exhibit this metamorphosis. The name comes from

the Greek *amphi*, meaning double, and *bios*, meaning life. The stimulus for this profound growth and development is the thyroid hormone, thyroxine. This can be proved by suppressing thyroid function in the tadpole, which will cause it to remain permanently in the larval stage, although it will continue to grow abnormally large. On the other hand, increasing the concentration of thyroxine in the water will induce a rapid metamorphosis to produce a tiny frog. I find this a useful model when thinking about thyroid disorders.

Too much or too little?

Thyroxine is very important in every stage of human development. It is important to the developing foetus and it is important to the newborn baby. In this country we automatically check for congenital hypothyroidism, which is important since early treatment is of vital importance.

Over-activity of the thyroid is called hyperthyroidism, or thyrotoxicosis and occurs when the thyroid produces too much thyroid hormone. It is associated with weight loss, increased appetite, palpitations, hot flushes, anxiety and restlessness, muscle weakness, tremor and, in women, often a reduction in menstrual flow. Sometimes the eyes may be affected and seem to bulge, hence the symptom of exophthalmos. Conventional treatment usually consists of taking anti-thyroid drugs, possibly radioactive iodine, and/or surgery. (Just think back to the mini frog and its accelerated metamorphosis. Small – weight loss – fast, fidgety, with bulging eyes.)

Under-activity of the thyroid, called hypothyroidism, is the result of too little thyroid hormone being produced. It is five times commoner in women than men, affecting up to ten per cent of women over the age of 50. It typically produces weight gain, fatigue and listlessness, cold sensitivity, skin dryness, fluid retention, constipation, loss of

libido, anxiety and depression. In addition, it may cause brittle nails, lustreless hair and diminished immunity. The conventional treatment consists of taking Levothyroxine, a replacement hormone, for life. (Here think back to my large, languid tadpole deprived of thyroxine.)

There are actually several causes of both hyperthyroidism and hypothyroidism, but they are beyond the scope of this article. What is important is understanding this concept of too much or too little.

Goitre

A goitre is an enlargement of the thyroid gland. This can be the result of several factors, including insufficient iodine in the diet, high consumption of certain foods that have a neutralising effect on iodine, such as cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower, and various drugs, such as Lithium. A goitre can occur in both hyperthyroidism and hypothyroidism.

Thyroglossal cysts and thyroid nodules

In embryonic life the thyroid gland migrates downwards from the pharynx to its position below the Adam's apple. Sometimes a cyst will develop along the thyroglossal tract. Usually this presents as a swelling above the thyroid in the midline of the neck. They should always be medically investigated.

Thyroid nodules are lumps that develop within the thyroid itself. Although 95 per cent are quite benign, as with thyroglossal cysts, it is important that they be investigated medically.

The thyroid enigma and homeopathy

The thyroid gland is a bit of an enigma. Although the textbook descriptions are quite clear, it is not unusual to see someone who looks to have an over-active thyroid yet who, on testing, is found to be hypothyroid and vice versa. In addition, one often sees someone who has been diagnosed as being under-active and who has been prescribed ever-increasing doses of Levothyroxine, yet derives no symptomatic benefit. They may have been told that the thyroid is functioning in the normal range, yet they still have symptoms of fatigue, high cholesterol and are still clearly out of balance.

The aim of homeopathic treatment is to stimulate the body's homeostatic or inner self-balancing mechanisms. In order to do this the individual ideally needs to be given the simillimum, the right remedy for them at that moment in time. Theoretically, that means that the right remedy could be one out of several thousand. In practice, however, we find that there is a manageable number of remedies that have a propensity to help the thyroid and the ones men-

tioned have all been found of value in my practice. Interestingly, the same remedies can sometimes be indicated in situations of both over-activity and under-activity. It is the individual that is being treated, rather than the condition.

Let me describe Jacqueline's case, because I think it illustrates the enigma of the thyroid, especially upon treatment. This woman is 45 years old. She consulted me after a two-year history of ill health, which had started with rapid weight loss and irritability. She had been diagnosed with thyrotoxicosis and had treatment with the anti-thyroid drug Carbimazole. This and other drugs had failed and she then had thyroid surgery, with initial improvement, which was then followed by weight gain, loss of energy and the subsequent diagnosis of hypothyroidism. Then followed a period of slowly escalating dosage of thyroxine, but without any marked improvement. By the time she came to see me she was two stones overweight, irritable, subject to numerous allergies and with a marked suspiciousness bordering on the paranoid. She felt that she would never get well again. This emotional state, especially the irritability, gloom and the suspiciousness highly suggested that she needed the remedy Thyroidinum. This she was given at monthly intervals, with immediate improvement in her



Remember the wonder of childhood: a frog transformed from a tadpole

Photo: istockphoto.com/Jamie Wilson; posed by model



Sea kelp is a classic remedy for generalised under-activity in overweight individuals

emotional state. She became motivated to lose her excess weight and was able to do so. Most importantly, she was gradually able to reduce her Levothyroxine dosage to a minimal level, upon which she is still maintained.

Exophthalmos

The prominent, bulging eyes that I mentioned above makes me think of two excellent remedies. The first is *Conium maculatum* which is very useful when the individual feels flat and depressed, and when they develop a very hard, smooth goitre. Being very superstitious is characteristic.

The other one is *Lycopus virginicus*. The characteristic here relates to the heart, with frequent palpitations and shortness of breath.

General over-activity

Ferrum iodatum is a remedy that is useful in the paradoxical situation where an overweight person is afflicted with hyperthyroidism. They can be peevish, sensitive to noise, and subject to Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) or colitis. *Iodum* is perhaps indicated in the classic hyperthyroid case. Here the individual is ravenously hungry, yet finds that weight just drops off them. They are incredibly hurried and restless. Very often they will admit to developing little compulsions, or even have developed full blown obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).

Goitre

As mentioned earlier, goitres can occur in both over- and under-activity. *Spongia tosta* is a useful remedy for someone with a goitre, generally with an overactive thyroid and a background picture of

tickling coughs, a tendency to suffocative cough at night (as if having to suck air through a sponge) or asthma. They may feel that their cough or difficulty breathing stems from their goitre.

Calcarea carbonica is very useful in cuddly, doughy people with goitres. They feel easily overwhelmed by life, have multiple fears and crave all sorts of indigestible food. They can be very constipated, yet be unconcerned about it. Their goitre tends to be associated with under-activity.

Bromum is useful in people with respiratory problems, who present with rock hard goitres and who long to be by the seaside, their favourite place. Being overheated makes them feel awful. Their thyroid can be either over-active or under-active.

General under-activity

Fucus vesiculosus (sea kelp) is a classic remedy for generalised under-activity in overweight individuals. They tend to be very constipated and subject to headaches "as if an iron ring is tight about the head". They may have both a goitre and exhibit exophthalmos.

Graphites is useful for overweight people with cracked, scaly skin troubles. They tend to have under-active thyroids and be weepy, sensitive and quite anxious.

Natrum muriaticum is another very

useful remedy for reserved, sensitive, and sorrowful folk who are subject to migraines and who usually like or crave salt. They can develop either over- or under-active thyroids. They are often slim with thin necks and slightly lank hair.

Other strategies

It is not always possible to pin a remedy down and sometimes one can look at the clinical state of the individual as the result of a series of layers that need to be worked through, or be peeled away one at a time, using different remedies for each layer. Yet another approach is to use organ remedies. These are called sarcodes, remedies made from organs of healthy cattle, sheep or pigs, which are prepared in a variety of potencies. The basic principle is the triphasic activity of the remedies. Thus, low potencies (of Thyroid) 3c, 4c and 5c stimulate the gland, medium potencies of 6c and 7c regulate it, and high potencies of 9c up to 30c depress it. When used properly it can be an effective strategy.

Nutritional advice

Good wholesome food is important if someone has a thyroid problem. They would be well advised to avoid refined foods, saturated fats and sugars and to have at least 50 per cent of the diet as fresh food.



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