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Thyroid Disease

Q: What is the thyroid?

A: Your thyroid (THY-roid) is a small gland found at the base of your neck, just below your Adam's apple. The thyroid produces two main hormones called T3 and T4. These hormones travel in your blood to all parts of your body. The thyroid hormones control the rate of many activities in your body. These include how fast you burn calories and how fast your heart beats. All of these activities together are known as your body's metabolism. A thyroid that is working right will produce the right amounts of hormones needed to keep your body's metabolism working at a rate that is not too fast or too slow.

Q: What kinds of thyroid problems can affect women?

A: Women are more likely than men to develop thyroid disorders. Thyroid disorders that can affect women include:

- Disorders that cause hyperthyroidism
- Disorders that cause hypothyroidism
- Thyroid nodules
- Thyroiditis
- Thyroid cancer
- Goiter

Q: What is hyperthyroidism?

A: Some disorders cause the thyroid to make more thyroid hormones than the body needs. This is called hyperthyroidism (hy-pur-THY-roi-diz-uhm), or overactive thyroid. The most common cause of hyperthyroidism is Graves' disease. Graves' disease is an autoimmune disorder, in which the body's own defense system, called the immune system, stimulates the thyroid. This causes it to make too much of the thyroid hormones. Hyperthyroidism can also be caused by thyroid nodules that prompt excess thyroid hormones to be made (see What are thyroid nodules?).

Q: What are the symptoms of hyperthyroidism?

A: At first, you might not notice symptoms of hyperthyroidism. They usually begin slowly. But over time, a speeded up metabolism can cause symptoms such as:

- Weight loss, even if you eat the same or more food
- Eating more than usual
- Rapid or irregular heartbeat or pounding of your heart
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Trouble sleeping
- Trembling in your hands and fingers
- Increased sweating
- Increased sensitivity to heat
- Muscle weakness
- More frequent bowel movements
- Less frequent menstrual periods with lighter than normal menstrual flow

