

PLASTIC EYE SURGERY ASSOCIATES, PLLC

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LIVING WITH GRAVES' DISEASE

Many people ask "what can I do about my Graves' disease?" When one feels helpless and powerless, a sense of hopelessness sets in. Although your Graves' disease will not go away, there are many things that you can do to have a greater mastery of your life. What you eat, what you do, what you think, and what you know - all these things effect your health and sense of well-being.

MEDICAL CARE

Your thyroid medication is essential. This is a replacement for the normal amount of thyroid hormone that your body once manufactured. When your thyroid was overactive, there was too much of the hormone circulating. That is the cause of symptoms such as insomnia, anxiety, jitters, heat intolerance, fatigue, heart racing, and weight loss.

If your thyroid was surgically removed or deactivated by radioactive iodine treatments, your body's supply of thyroid hormone (thyroxine) was decreased. Periodic blood tests determine your level of thyroxine. This level reflects a combination of the hormone produced by your body as well as an identical substance, which is provided by your medication. If your blood level of thyroxine is too high, you will begin to experience similar symptoms as described above with an over-active thyroid. If the blood level of the hormone is too low, you will experience hypothyroid symptoms: slow heart rate, hair and nail changes, dry skin, sensitivity to cold, joint pains, hoarseness, weight gain, loss of appetite, difficulty concentrating, depression, constipation, muscle weakness, muscle cramps, and puffy eyes. If you begin to feel any of these symptoms, contact your doctor.

If you are having some of the symptoms described above, a simple blood test will clarify if your medication needs adjusting.

If your blood levels are satisfactory, there may be other medications that will take care of your symptoms. Complaining of symptoms is not "bothering" your doctor; it is helping him / her to help you. NEVER ADJUST YOUR MEDICATIONS WITHOUT THE HELP OF YOUR DOCTOR; however, the remainder of your care is up to you.

NUTRITION

There are a number of nutritional concepts that you need to keep in mind when you plan your meals. Weight control is often a problem for people with Graves' disease. Your thyroid controls metabolism, and you may have a tendency to gain weight. Eating to reduce caloric intake while maintaining high nutrition requires more effort than you may have been accustomed to when your thyroid hormone level and metabolism were elevated. Focus on fresh fruits and vegetables - these will give you the most vitamins and minerals for your efforts and offer the balance you need in your diet.

Sodium (salt), a preservative in almost all canned and frozen foods; may contribute to swelling. Since swelling is frequently a problem for patients with Graves' disease, you may now need to be more aware of your salt intake.

For reasons unknown, people with Graves' disease sometimes develop problems with an elevated cholesterol. Therefore, you may have to be more aware of your fat intake. Fish and chicken will be better for you than excessive amounts of pork and beef. Limit rich sauces and cheeses. Have your cholesterol checked.

Learn about nutrition. There are many resources. Both the American Heart Association and the American Diabetes Association have excellent nutritional food plans, as do Weight Watchers, your local

hospital dieticians, and registered dietician consultants. FAD DIETS ARE NOT HEALTHY -- AVOID THEM. Adopt a change in your lifestyle, not another diet.

EXERCISE

You will feel better if you develop a regular exercise program. Even regular walking is beneficial. Exercise strengthens your heart and improves circulation and muscle tone, which are needed to keep your cardiovascular system functioning well.

Studies show that exercise reduces appetite and increases your energy level. Concentrate on activities you already know how to do, as well as learning new ones. Have a variety of physical activities to avoid boredom and the limitations of weather. WALKING continues to be the most overall beneficial activity; and it is available for everyone! If you can't walk, bike, swim, or ROCK! Vigorous rocking in a stable rocking chair uses all the muscles in the body! Exercise with a friend. This increases the enjoyment of and dedication to your exercise program.

RELAXATION

Learning to relax refers to reducing the muscular tension in order to increase effective circulation, as well as mental calmness. It is not only an "attitude" but a learnable skill. Relaxation is more than just "getting away". It is a positive and satisfying experience and gives peace of mind. It is well documented that Graves' disease is also a stress-related illness; that is, stress makes it worse. The "stress" is often the result of the fast-paced action-packed lifestyle that we all lead.

Relaxation may take many forms: learning new things, exercising, gardening, walking in the woods, creative activities, soft lighting, soft music, a bubble bath, a good book. If you are interested in mental exercises to create peace of mind and a

relaxed body, there are many to choose from. You may prefer the systematic tensing and letting go of specific muscle groups (progressive muscle relaxation), or you might like imagining beautiful scenes. There is considerable research being done on the efficacy of mental imagery (visualization) and its effect on the immune system. Yoga, Tai Chi, and different forms of meditation are all ways to practice relaxation. Consult your local bookstore for more information and ideas.

Relaxation exercises should be practiced daily. When you discover your favorite activities, plan to devote at least one half hour each day to them. If you think you don't have the time, remember that the half-hour that you spend relaxing may well increase your overall daily productivity. You have to make a personal commitment to yourself. The National Institute of Mental Health says: "Finding effective techniques for relaxation is not merely a pastime for the idle rich. It is essential for everyone's physical and mental well-being."

SUPPORT SYSTEM

A support system may be defined as those caring, available people in your life who will listen, tell it like it is, and allow you to reciprocate in a caring, sharing dialogue. It is important that people in your support system be available, that is, living near you. Long-distance friends are good to have, but they do not substitute for a support system near at hand. Listening is important. Many times you do not need advice, you just need to say what you are thinking and feeling out loud and have those thoughts and feelings acknowledged. You need to discuss things, not necessarily have problems solved.

Support groups provide the essential ingredient that is needed for everyone that has to live with a disorder: HOPE and a SENSE OF HUMOR! If you are interested in joining a local thyroid support group, we can point you in the right direction.