

LIVING WITH AUTOIMMUNE THYROID DISORDER

Many people ask "what can I do about my thyroid disorder?" When one feels helpless and powerless, a sense of hopelessness sets in. Although your thyroid disorder 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 affect your health and sense of well-being.

Most people who are hyperthyroid eventually undergo thyroid destruction with radiation or surgery, since long-term treatment with medication that decreases thyroid function may have a number of complications. Therefore, the remainder of this section will be geared to people who are hypothyroid.

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 in your gland causing 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 thyroid level. This level reflects a combination of the hormone produced by your body as well as a similar substance 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.* 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.**

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 thyroid disorder. 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 if 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 thyroid disorder, you may now need to be more aware of your salt intake. Alcohol avoidance is also prudent.

For reasons unknown, people with thyroid disorder often develop problems with elevated cholesterol. Therefore, you may have to be more aware of your fat intake. Fish and poultry 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 dietitians, and registered dietician consultants or nutritionists. 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 or swim, 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 autoimmune thyroid disorders are stress-related illnesses; that is, stress makes them 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 or the internet 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!