

JANUARY: THYROID AWARENESS MONTH

Recognize the Signs

Clues about the symptoms of thyroid dysfunction BY BETH WANG

You might know someone who has suffered a thyroid dysfunction, such as hyperthyroidism, hypothyroidism or even thyroid cancer. But for many people, the organ and its role remains a mystery. Turns out, this little-understood gland plays a key role in regulating our bodies.

“It has major functions like controlling our metabolism and our heart rate—those are the two major things,” says Dr. Jacob Moalem, associate professor for endocrine surgery at the University of Rochester.

Because the thyroid is so central to how we function, it’s important to recognize when something’s wrong, and take action.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Talking about thyroid issues often makes us think of weight gain, but that’s just one in a whole host of symptoms.

With hypothyroidism, the thyroid doesn’t create enough hormones, Moalem says. People suffering from hypothyroidism find they don’t have enough energy.

“They’re frequently tired, they’re gaining weight unexpectedly. They’re just dragging,” Moalem says.

Conversely, hyperthyroidism—when the thyroid makes too much hormone—essentially “revs up” the system.

“They can have arrhythmias. Their mind is racing. Their eyes can bulge. They’ll have trouble concentrating. People lose their jobs. ‘A’ students become ‘C’ and ‘D’ students,” Moalem says.

And, because they digest food much faster than normal, people with hyperthyroidism have voracious appetites and constantly eat, which can cause weight gain.

CANCER CONCERNS

Oftentimes, thyroid cancer has no symptoms, so it’s important to be aware of any irregularities in your neck, where nodules might form, indicating possible cancer.

“It’s important to be aware of what your neck feels like and if there’s a growing nodule in the center of the neck,” Moalem says.



WHAT IS THE THYROID?

The thyroid is a 2-inch gland located in the front of the neck, just above the breastbone. It consists of two lobes, one on each side of the windpipe, connected by a bridge of thyroid tissue, known as the isthmus.

SOURCE: URMC.ROCHESTER.EDU/ENCYCLOPEDIA

If you notice a significantly large nodule—about a half-inch—your doctor should consider scheduling a biopsy. According to Moalem, a biopsy is a quick procedure that can be done in the office.

“It takes a few minutes and doesn’t require anesthesia,” he says.

And, much of the time, it turns out there’s nothing wrong.

“The overwhelming majority of nodules are not cancerous,” Moalem says. “As long as they don’t change or cause any symptoms, there’s no treatment required. We just have to make sure they don’t change.”

If it turns out to be cancerous, there’s actually some good news. Thyroid cancer is associated with some of the highest survival rates of any malignancy—close to 100%.

“It’s a slow-growing malignancy, and the surgery for it is quick and effective,” he says.

IF YOU FEEL SOMETHING...

The best way to catch thyroid issues is to

take action if you notice something is off.

“If you are really not feeling well, then you need to have a conversation with your primary care doctor,” Moalem says. “One of the things he should look at is your thyroid.”

It doesn’t take much to check up on your thyroid. Moalem says all you need is a simple blood test. He adds most primary care doctors are comfortable treating thyroid problems, and it’s rare to need a referral to an endocrinologist.

If you or your doctor finds a firm nodule in your neck, you should be scheduled for an ultrasound and be referred for biopsy if something is found.

The important thing to remember is that if you feel something, say something.

“Once in a while, a patient comes in with huge masses in the neck that would have been far simpler to manage had anyone brought them to medical attention earlier,” he says.