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Hyperthyroidism (overactive thyroid)

Hyperthyroidism (overactive thyroid) occurs when your thyroid gland produces too much of the hormone thyroxine. Hyperthyroidism can accelerate your body's metabolism, causing unintentional weight loss and a rapid or irregular heartbeat.

Several treatments are available for hyperthyroidism. Doctors use anti-thyroid medications and radioactive iodine to slow the production of thyroid hormones. Sometimes, hyperthyroidism treatment involves surgery to remove all or part of your thyroid gland.

Although hyperthyroidism can be serious if you ignore it, most people respond well once hyperthyroidism is diagnosed and treated.

Symptoms

Hyperthyroidism can mimic other health problems, which can make it difficult for your doctor to diagnose. It can also cause a wide variety of signs and symptoms, including:

- Unintentional weight loss, even when your appetite and food intake stay the same or increase
- Rapid heartbeat (tachycardia) — commonly more than 100 beats a minute
- Irregular heartbeat (arrhythmia)
- Pounding of your heart (palpitations)
- Increased appetite
- Nervousness, anxiety and irritability
- Tremor — usually a fine trembling in your hands and fingers
- Sweating
- Changes in menstrual patterns
- Increased sensitivity to heat
- Changes in bowel patterns, especially more frequent bowel movements
- An enlarged thyroid gland (goiter), which may appear as a swelling at the base of your neck

- Fatigue, muscle weakness
- Difficulty sleeping
- Skin thinning

Older adults are more likely to have either no signs or symptoms or subtle ones, such as an increased heart rate, heat intolerance and a tendency to become tired during ordinary activities.

Graves' ophthalmopathy

Sometimes an uncommon problem called Graves' ophthalmopathy may affect your eyes, especially if you smoke. This disorder makes your eyeballs protrude beyond their normal protective orbits when the tissues and muscles behind your eyes swell. Eye problems often improve without treatment.

Signs and symptoms of Graves' ophthalmopathy include:

- Dry eyes, Red or swollen eyes
- Excessive tearing or discomfort in one or both eyes
- Light sensitivity, blurry or double vision, inflammation, or reduced eye movement
- Protruding eyeballs

When to see a doctor

If you experience unexplained weight loss, a rapid heartbeat, unusual sweating, swelling at the base of your neck or other signs and symptoms associated with hyperthyroidism, see your doctor. It's important to completely describe the changes you've observed, because many signs and symptoms of hyperthyroidism may be associated with a number of other conditions.

If you've been treated for hyperthyroidism or you currently are being treated, see your doctor regularly as advised so that he or she can monitor your condition.

Causes

Hyperthyroidism can be caused by a number of conditions, including Graves' disease, Plummer's disease and thyroiditis.

Your thyroid is a small, butterfly-shaped gland at the base of your neck, just below your Adam's apple. The thyroid gland has an enormous impact on your health. Every aspect of your metabolism is regulated by thyroid hormones.

Your thyroid gland produces two main hormones, thyroxine (T4) and triiodothyronine (T3), that influence every cell in your body. They maintain the rate at which your body uses fats and carbohydrates, help control your body temperature, influence your heart rate, and help regulate the production of protein. Your thyroid also produces a hormone that helps regulate the amount of calcium in your blood (calcitonin).

Risk factors for hyperthyroidism, include:

- A family history, particularly of Graves' disease
- Female sex
- A personal history of certain chronic illnesses, such as type 1 diabetes, pernicious anemia and primary adrenal insufficiency

Complications

Hyperthyroidism can lead to a number of complications:

- **Heart problems.** Some of the most serious complications of hyperthyroidism involve the heart. These include a rapid heart rate, a heart rhythm disorder called atrial fibrillation that increases your risk of stroke, and congestive heart failure — a condition in which your heart can't circulate enough blood to meet your body's needs.
- **Brittle bones.** Untreated hyperthyroidism can also lead to weak, brittle bones (osteoporosis). The strength of your bones depends, in part, on the amount of calcium and other minerals they contain. Too much thyroid hormone interferes with your body's ability to incorporate calcium into your bones.
- **Eye problems.** People with Graves' ophthalmopathy develop eye problems, including bulging, red or swollen eyes, sensitivity to light, and blurring or double vision. Untreated, severe eye problems can lead to vision loss.
- **Red, swollen skin.** In rare cases, people with Graves' disease develop Graves' dermopathy. This affects the skin, causing redness and swelling, often on the shins and feet.
- **Thyrotoxic crisis.** Hyperthyroidism also places you at risk of thyrotoxic crisis — a sudden intensification of your symptoms, leading to a fever, a rapid pulse and even delirium. If this occurs, seek immediate medical care.

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