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What Women Need to Know

MANY WELLNESS ASPECTS DEPEND ON THEIR THYROID, AND A DYSFUNCTIONAL GLAND CAN HAVE UNWELCOME EFFECTS ON HEALTH.

BY Deborah Skolnik

As a woman, you likely already prioritize certain aspects of your well-being in an effort to live a long, healthy life. Perhaps you never miss a pap smear or mammogram or are diligent about protecting your heart in order to reduce your chance of cardiovascular disease. But what about taking care of your thyroid?

Sure, it's pretty easy to put the small gland on your mental B-list. But

even though an adult thyroid only weighs roughly an ounce on average, it's a health heavyweight, producing hormones that enter the bloodstream and affect every cell in the body. And in women, they help regulate everything from menstruation to fertility.

Considering women are more likely than men to develop thyroid disease (one in eight women will develop it), the female-specific effects are important to be aware of—and they may convince you to put your thyroid on the VIP

list when it comes to prioritizing your health. Read on to learn about a few areas of wellness where the thyroid plays a leading role.

A Jump-Start for Puberty

There's a reason why *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* is considered a classic young adult book. Even before they hit the double digits, many girls anxiously wonder when they'll begin puberty and get their period. They—and you—might

Numbers Game One in eight women will develop thyroid disease during her lifetime.





Could Your Thyroid Be Behind Your Baby Blues?

It's not news that the birth of a baby—and the roller-coaster ride of emotions that accompanies said birth—can give way to what's known as the baby blues. Most new moms experience a combo platter of sadness, anxiety, mood swings, fatigue, crying spells and sleeping issues. But baby blues aren't the only thing that can lead to post-birth anxiety. Another possibility is that your thyroid may have become inflamed after giving birth to your baby.

This condition, called postpartum thyroiditis, affects a small but significant number of new mothers—between 5% and 10%. It is caused by an antibody attack on the thyroid, leads to thyroid inflammation and can go on to trigger hyperthyroidism and then hypothyroidism. In addition to anxiety, symptoms that appear four to eight months after giving birth include weight gain, fatigue, depression and constipation. Women with Type 1 diabetes

and those with a family history of thyroid issues are more likely to develop the condition. It can be tricky to ID postpartum thyroiditis, since it's easy to shrug off depression and other symptoms as just something you deal with when there's a new baby at home. But if your symptoms aren't easing up or seem like something more serious, be sure to talk to your doctor. She can order a blood test to check your thyroid hormone levels, which is usually enough to diagnose the condition.



be surprised that the timing of these milestones depends in part on their thyroid function.

In order for menstruation to begin, a female's body must make two reproductive hormones, estrogen and progesterone, and these levels need to rise and fall at carefully choreographed times. After the ovaries release an egg, the hormones surge, causing the lining of the uterus to thicken and prepare for a possible pregnancy. If the egg doesn't get fertilized, the hormone levels drop and the uterus sheds its lining, causing bleeding to begin.

If a girl has hypothyroidism—an inability to make a sufficient amount of thyroid hormones—and the condition is severe enough, it can alter the production and expression of the reproductive hormones estrogen and progesterone indirectly, says Tiffany Mullen, DO, a functional medicine physician in Milwaukee, and CEO of Vytal Health. This can lead to symptoms like fatigue and constipation along with a slowing of height growth and delayed onset of puberty. "Hypothyroidism can change whether that child would start a menstrual cycle at a certain time or not. It would have to be corrected in order for that person to have essentially normal menstrual cycles in puberty," she says.

As with adults, adolescents with hypothyroidism are treated with

An issue with your thyroid can mess with your period at all stages of life.

hormone replacement therapy. Over time, the daily pill will balance hormone levels, allowing the body to go through puberty-related changes. Interestingly, hyperthyroidism—an overproduction of thyroid hormone—can also delay puberty. If you have any concerns, talk with your child's doctor.

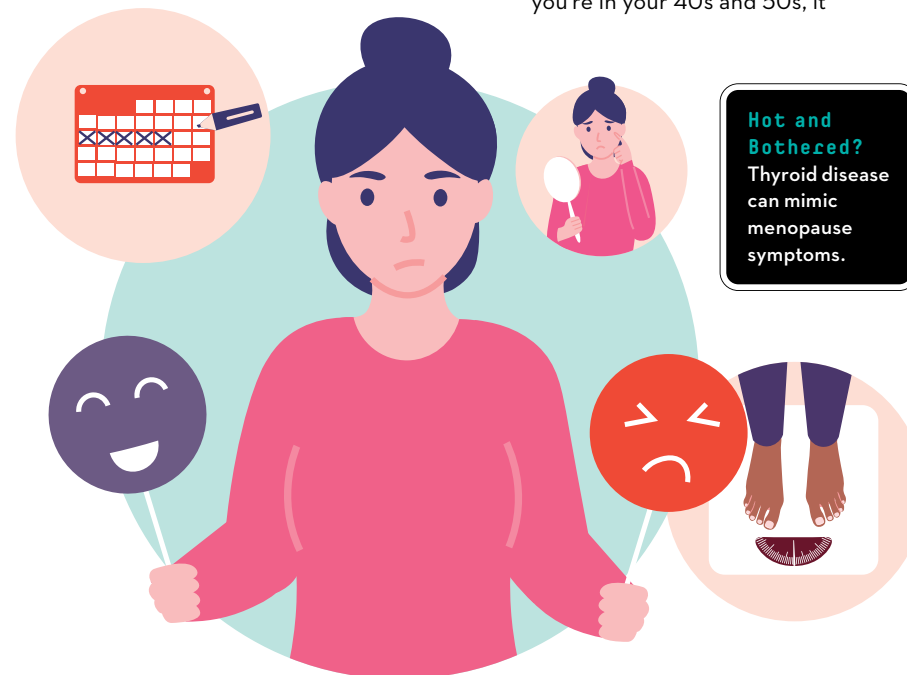
A Factor in Fertility and Pregnancy

Later in life, a thyroid condition that's not properly treated can continue to affect the menstrual cycle. Too much or not enough thyroid hormone can lead to very heavy, very light or

irregular periods, and can even cause menstruation to stop altogether (known as amenorrhea). It can also affect reproduction and pregnancy, Mullen says. "Because all of the [body's] hormones dance together, thyroid conditions can change ovulation patterns, leading to a difficult time getting pregnant and keeping a pregnancy."

With hypothyroidism, low levels of thyroid hormone can make it more difficult to get pregnant to begin with, interfering with ovulation or preventing it entirely. That's why it's important to get your hypothyroidism under control before trying to conceive. One smaller study in the *International Journal of Applied and Medical Research* that looked at women with infertility found that 24% of them had hypothyroidism. After treating the hypothyroidism, however, almost 77% of those women went on to conceive within six weeks to a year.

But if you have symptoms of a thyroid disorder (or a known diagnosis) and are already pregnant, be sure to tell your doctor. If hypothyroidism or hyperthyroidism goes unaddressed, it can lead to serious issues during pregnancy, including miscarriage, preeclampsia, low birth weight, and, for



3 More Symptoms to Watch Out For



as therapy or meds aren't helping to ease depression or anxiety symptoms. A thyroid test may be in order.

Women should be especially aware of these health conditions, which could be linked to a thyroid disorder.

Weakened Bones Osteoporosis, a condition that causes bones to become weakened, can be linked to a thyroid issue, since too much thyroid hormone due to an overactive thyroid can lead to a loss of calcium

in the bones. White and Asian women and older women are most at risk for osteoporosis.

Mood Disorders An untreated thyroid condition can negatively affect mental health, leading to depression and anxiety. Mental health conditions have many causes, of course, but talk to your doctor if other treatments such

Insomnia Counting sheep again? While the connection between hypothyroidism and sleep quality is still unclear, research in the journal *Risk Management and Healthcare Policy* shows that women with hypothyroidism are more at risk of sleep issues compared with men who have the thyroid condition.

hyperthyroidism, premature birth. Your doctor will work with you to closely monitor hormone levels and provide treatment to help reduce any risks to you and the fetus.

A Near-Twin to Menopause

Irregular periods, weight gain—if you're in your 40s and 50s, it

must be menopause, right? Not so fast. Thyroid disease can produce many of the same symptoms. "An overactive thyroid can cause palpitations and sweating, which may be confused for hot flashes. It may also cause a woman to lose weight, which could cause her periods to stop," Mullen says.

The best way to figure out exactly what's going on is to see a physician. Although thyroid disease can start at any age, it often occurs around the same time as menopause, Mullen explains. A physician can check for thyroid problems while evaluating menopausal symptoms.

To add to the confusion, women with a thyroid disorder may experience earlier onset menopause, which occurs in the early 40s or even before their 40th birthday. "Because thyroid hormones interact with estrogen and progesterone, and vice versa, changes in them may impact the timing of menopause," Mullen says. Consider that another good reason to have regular checkups.