

Understanding Hypothyroidism: A Patient Guide – Charles P. Catania, MD

What Is Hypothyroidism?

Hypothyroidism is a common condition in which the thyroid gland, located in the front of the neck, does not produce enough thyroid hormones. These hormones are critical for regulating your body's metabolism, which affects everything from your heart rate to how your body uses energy.

When the thyroid is underactive, the body's functions begin to slow down, leading to a wide range of symptoms that can affect your daily life.

Common Symptoms of Hypothyroidism

Symptoms can vary from person to person, and they often develop slowly over time. Some of the most common include fatigue, weight gain, cold intolerance (feeling cold easily), dry skin, constipation, depression or mood changes, slowed heart rate, thinning hair or hair loss, puffy face, hoarseness, memory issues or difficulty concentrating ("brain fog"), menstrual irregularities or fertility issues. In children and teens, hypothyroidism can also lead to delayed growth and development.

Causes of Hypothyroidism

The most common cause in the United States is Hashimoto's thyroiditis, an autoimmune condition where the immune system attacks the thyroid gland. Other causes include certain medications (like lithium or amiodarone), radiation therapy or surgical removal of the thyroid, iodine deficiency (rare in the U.S.) and congenital hypothyroidism (present at birth).

How Is Hypothyroidism diagnosed?

Screening and diagnosis are done with blood tests. The two primary tests include:

- **TSH (Thyroid-Stimulating Hormone):** This hormone is produced by the pituitary gland and tells the thyroid to make thyroid hormones. *High TSH levels suggest the thyroid is underactive.*
- **Free T4 (Thyroxine):** This test measures the level of one of the main thyroid hormones. *Low levels indicate hypothyroidism.*

Routine screening may be recommended for individuals at higher risk, such as women over age 60, individuals with a family history of thyroid disease, patients with autoimmune diseases like type 1 diabetes or celiac disease, and those with a history of thyroid surgery or radiation to the neck.

Treatment of Hypothyroidism

Hypothyroidism is typically treated with levothyroxine, a synthetic version of the T4 hormone. It is taken as a once-daily oral pill. The dosage is tailored to each patient based on age, weight, heart health, and blood test results.

Key points about treatment:

- It usually takes a few weeks to start feeling better after starting medication.
- Regular follow-up with blood tests is needed to adjust the dose and ensure hormone levels are in the target range.
- Treatment is lifelong in most cases.

It's important to take levothyroxine on an empty stomach, usually first thing in the morning, and to avoid taking it with calcium or iron supplements, which can interfere with absorption.

Common Misconceptions about Hypothyroidism

- *“Hypothyroidism always causes weight gain - and treating it will make the weight fall off.”*: While hypothyroidism can cause modest weight gain (often 5-10 pounds, mostly due to fluid retention), most weight gain is not solely due to low thyroid hormone levels. Once treated, metabolism normalizes, but weight loss typically requires the same healthy eating and activity as it does for others.
- *“All fatigue or mood issues are from my thyroid.”*: Hypothyroidism *can* cause fatigue, depression, and brain fog, but these symptoms are non-specific. If your thyroid levels are normal on medication, ongoing symptoms might be due to something else - like poor sleep, anemia, depression, or other health issues.
- *“Once I start thyroid medication, I’ll feel better right away.”*: It can take several weeks to months for thyroid hormone levels to normalize and symptoms to improve. Some people need dose adjustments, and your provider will monitor blood levels over time to fine-tune treatment.
- *“You don’t need treatment unless your symptoms are severe.”*: Even mild hypothyroidism (called subclinical hypothyroidism) can affect cholesterol, fertility, pregnancy outcomes, and mental health. Your provider will decide if treatment is needed based on bloodwork, age, symptoms, and other risk factors.

Living Well with Hypothyroidism

With proper treatment and regular monitoring, most people with hypothyroidism live healthy, active lives. If you experience new or worsening symptoms, talk to your provider. Adjustments in medication or additional evaluation may be needed.

Family medicine and internal medicine providers are well-trained in diagnosing and treating common thyroid disorders, including hypothyroidism. They typically handle the initial diagnosis through blood tests (TSH and Free T4), starting and adjusting thyroid hormone replacement (levothyroxine), routine monitoring with follow-up labs, and addressing symptoms and medication side effects.

When might you need to see an Endocrinologist?

Your provider might refer you to a specialist if:

- Your thyroid hormone levels are hard to stabilize.
- You have symptoms that don’t improve with treatment.
- You have a complex thyroid condition (e.g., nodules, goiter, or suspected thyroid cancer).
- You are pregnant or planning pregnancy with thyroid concerns.
- You have other autoimmune or endocrine conditions that complicate treatment.

But again, for most people, ongoing care can be safely and effectively managed by their family provider.

If you have questions about hypothyroidism or think you may be at risk, please speak with your PentaHealth healthcare provider at your next visit and remember to call us first for all your healthcare needs.

Dr. Charles P. Catania is the medical director for PentaHealth. He is board certified in Family Medicine and Hospice Medicine. He received his medical degree from the American University of the Caribbean School of Medicine; medically trained in England; and completed residency at Underwood Memorial Hospital in Woodbury, New Jersey, where he was named Chief Resident in 2009 and served on the New Jersey Academy of Family Physicians Board of Directors.

Dr. Catania has been in a private practice setting since 2010 and has been named “Readers’ Choice Top Doc” in South Jersey Magazine in August 2013, and “Top Doc” by his peers in Mainline Today Magazine in 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022.

Dr. Catania has an interest in all facets of family medicine. He enjoys spending time and getting to know his patients on a personal level and providing care when they need it most. He loves working our walk-in hours and in our PentaHealth Today clinic on Sundays.

He treasures time with his wife and children, and he takes pride in bringing a very personal and friendly experience when caring for his patients here at PentaHealth.



Dr. Charles P. Catania