

Hypothyroidism: small gland, huge effect.

Cold, dry skin that bruises at the slightest bump and takes ages to heal every nick and cut; a constant mental fog and physical exhaustion despite extra sleep; difficulty conceiving and carrying a pregnancy to term; cramping muscles, prickling limbs, and reflexes that always seem to fire a second too slow. This seems like a disparate set of symptoms, but they can all be traced back to a single problem: an underactive thyroid gland, also known as hypothyroidism.

The thyroid is a small gland located in your throat beneath your Adam's apple, and despite its size, it plays a major role in keeping your whole body functional: your skin, your brain function, your muscular, reproductive, and nervous systems. And although it's located in your neck, the thyroid is able to affect every part of the body by producing hormones that travel through your bloodstream from your tip to your toes.

There are five main hormones produced by the thyroid gland. One, called calcitonin, helps to keep your bones from losing too much calcium. The rest – T1, T2, T3, and T4 – are iodine-containing hormones that give instructions to the rest of the body's organs to help to maintain, control, and fine-tune your body's metabolism.

“Metabolism” is a word that encompasses all the microscopic biological processes going on in your cells every second of every day: how fast your body makes new cells, how effectively your body uses the energy and nutrients in the food you eat, how easily your cells can respond to changes. In a healthy person, these hormones are produced in the precise quantities needed to keep the body in tune with its surroundings.

But with hypothyroidism, not enough hormones are made to tell your skin to make new cells quickly after an injury – and cuts take too long to heal. Not enough hormones are made to help your body maintain the right temperature – and you feel cold in spite of the layers of clothing you put on. Not enough hormones are made to tell your body how to use up the energy it's taking in from food – and you find yourself gaining weight no matter what your diet looks like, yet still physically and mentally exhausted at the same time. Not enough hormones are made to help your body listen to the signals produced by the adrenal gland – and you find yourself feeling sad and tired in spite of all your efforts to the contrary.

A healthy thyroid maintains what scientists call “homeostasis”: a body that is in balance, that can warm itself when it gets cool, that can heal itself when it is injured, that can take in nutrition and use the stored energy. A body in homeostasis can feel a sense of well-being, and it can feel comfortable in its environment. But when your thyroid is underactive, it can be a struggle to make it through a single day of work, chores, and obligations.

A fully functional thyroid is absolutely essential for health. Even if every other part of your body is in perfect working condition, hypothyroidism alone can be enough to rob you of the sense of happiness, comfort, and vigor that you may be missing in your daily life.

A visit to a nutritional coach can help you to develop and plan a holistic approach that considers every aspect of your metabolism and how it affects your mind, body, and spirit. There's no one-size-fits-all approach to health, and the right health practitioner can help you find out the approach that will keep your body on the path to restorative health.