

## **Subclinical Hypothyroidism**

**By Alexis Chesney MS, ND, LAc**

The thyroid gland is an important part of the endocrine system. It regulates body temperature and metabolism by producing thyroid hormone. Triiodothyronine (T3) and thyroxine (T4) are made using iodine and tyrosine. Low functioning thyroid, or hypothyroidism, occurs when the thyroid is unable to produce enough thyroid hormones. Symptoms may include: fatigue, constipation, weakness, depression, weight gain, poor mental concentration, cold intolerance, dry skin and hair, menstrual irregularities, edema. In order to screen for hypothyroidism, a blood test called TSH (thyroid stimulating hormone) is ordered. This hormone is secreted by the pituitary gland in order to prompt the thyroid gland to produce thyroid hormone. Often, the first sign of a sluggish thyroid is a high TSH. To better understand why, let's think about it like this: the pituitary gland makes increasing amounts of TSH, or starts "shouting" at the thyroid gland to make more thyroid hormone. Ideally, the thyroid would respond by producing more thyroid hormone. In 2003, the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists recommended that the upper limit of normal for TSH change from 5.0 mU/L to 3.0 mU/L. This means that TSH levels above 3.0 may indicate a low functioning thyroid. A low TSH in combination with symptoms listed above warrant naturopathic treatment. Post-partum women, the elderly and those with a family history of thyroid disease should especially be checked for thyroid function.

### *How to Protect Your Thyroid*

Iodine belongs to the class of elements called halogens. Other halogens that compete with each other for iodine's place in the thyroid are fluorine, chlorine and bromine. Since iodine has been taken out of table salt and is no longer used in commercial baking, iodine intake has decreased in this country. Bromine has replaced iodine in commercial baking. Chlorine is used in pools, insecticides and cleaning products. Flouride, found in toothpaste, is also found in pesticides. In addition to avoiding our exposure to the halogens that compete with iodine, iodine-rich foods are recommended. Sea vegetables like kelp, nori or dulse are among the highest source of iodine. Fish, shellfish, yogurt and eggs are also high in iodine.

### *Naturopathic Treatment of Hypothyroid*

As discussed above, eating iodine rich foods and decreasing exposure to other competing halogens is the first step in treating a low functioning thyroid. Bladderwrack (*Fucus vesiculosus*), a sea vegetable, is one of the highest iodine-containing foods. It is also recommended to avoid goitrogens, which suppress thyroid function. These include vegetables in the Brassica family (i.e., cabbage, broccoli, spinach), soybeans, pine nuts, peanuts, cassava, and millet. The amino acid L-tyrosine, and the minerals zinc and selenium, are used by the thyroid gland to produce thyroid hormones. *Coleus forskohlii* and Guggal (*Commiphora mukul*) are two herbs that are incredibly supportive to the thyroid. Contrast hydrotherapy to the neck is another way to treat hypothyroidism. Alternate five minutes of hot followed by five minutes of cold compresses to the neck, always ending in cold. This will improve circulation to the thyroid and decrease inflammation. Remember to ask your health care provider before taking any supplements. In some cases, thyroid medications may be recommended.