

Over- or underactive thyroids can cause a number of health problems that are often misdiagnosed

SHE couldn't understand why she felt so run down. She battled to find the energy to do anything and was always tired, her muscles aching. Zanele* also felt cold all the time and her hair and skin were dry. To top it all, she seemed to have put on weight and was constipated.

No matter what she did, nothing seemed to help – she'd popped vitamins, taken laxatives and even changed her shampoo and body cream.

Eventually she visited her doctor, who suggested she might have a thyroid problem. A simple examination was done and a blood sample taken which was sent off for testing. When the test results were returned, the doctor was right – she was suffering from an underactive thyroid and was

immediately put on medication. Within a few short weeks, she had almost returned to her normal self – her energy was renewed, her hair and skin back to their usual condition. She'd even lost some weight.

Zanele was one of the five million South Africans who suffer from a thyroid disorder – a problem that is quite easy to put right with medication, as long as it is properly diagnosed.

The effects

Many women blame their weight problems on an underactive thyroid, but the truth is that either an underactive or an overactive thyroid can affect your health. This is especially true for pregnant women.

According to Dr Cor Aalbers, a chemical pathologist and member of the National Pathology Group, which is linked to the South African Medical Association, thyroid disorders are sometimes difficult to diagnose, as the symptoms can indicate a number of other diseases.

Both an underactive thyroid (hypothyroidism) and an overactive thyroid (hyperthyroidism) are common thyroid disorders that doctors can test for and that can be treated.

"Thyroid problems can affect anyone at any age. However, women are more likely to get thyroid problems than men," he says.

How it works

The thyroid gland is a

small, butterfly-shaped gland found just below the Adam's apple in the throat. It produces two hormones which control metabolism and affect the function of many of your body's organs, including the heart, brain, liver, kidneys and skin.

A thyroid gland is underactive when it produces too few thyroid hormones. In most cases, an underactive thyroid is caused by a condition in which your immune system attacks and destroys the thyroid. It can also be caused by treatment of an overactive thyroid or by certain medications, and it may even be present at birth. The thyroid may temporarily become underactive after pregnancy or if it is swollen due to a viral infection. A problem with the pituitary gland in the brain, which oversees all hormonal functions in the body can also cause an underactive thyroid. Your symptoms would be much the same as Zanele's.

An overactive thyroid refers to any condition in which the body has too many thyroid hormones (is overactive). Symptoms of an overactive thyroid include feeling nervous and irritable, a racing heart, trembling hands, sweating and not being able to sleep. The most common cause of an overactive thyroid is Graves' disease, in which the immune system attacks the body's own tissues. One symptom of this is the bulging of one or both eyes.

Another cause is one or more lumps in the thyroid, a condition known as a goitre. You could also have overactive thyroid symptoms if you have thyroiditis, which causes the gland to leak thyroid hormones, or if you take too much of the thyroid hormones in tablet form.

Fortunately, once diagnosed, thyroid problems are easily treatable, and the symptoms and effects are reversible in adults as long as you keep taking your medication.

Testing and treatment

If you suspect you have a thyroid problem, visit your clinic or doctor. Blood will be taken and sent off for laboratory tests.

An underactive thyroid can be successfully treated by medication, but you will need to continue to see your doctor at least once a year for a proper checkup in case your medication needs to be changed.

Anti-thyroid drugs are used to treat an overactive thyroid or in some cases your doctor might advise surgery.

Mums and tots

If you are pregnant, having an underactive thyroid is serious because thyroid hormone is important for brain development in the baby and children born with low thyroid function could have severe brain abnormalities if the condition is not recognised and treated promptly.

It isn't possible for a doctor to tell at birth if the thyroid is under- or overactive, but one sign is if a baby is not active.

Other side effects develop slowly and can include jaundice, constipation, failure to thrive, a hoarse cry and not reaching developmental milestones, such as smiling, rolling over and so on, within the same period as other children.

Graves' disease is also a concern during pregnancy. If thyroid problems are not treated in pregnancy, they can result in early labour due to a dangerous condition called pre-eclampsia in which you will have high blood pressure and swelling of the hands and feet. Your baby could also be born underweight or have physical defects.

If you have any reason to suspect you might have a thyroid problem, talk to your clinic or doctor as soon as possible. □

*Not her real name

JOSE LUIS PELINEZ/INFORM/REUTERS/ISTOCK



Check your thyroid