

About Thyroid Cancer - A Quick Guide



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This is a brief summary of the information on 'About thyroid cancer' from CancerHelp UK. You will find more detailed information on the website.

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The thyroid gland

The thyroid is a gland that makes and releases hormones. It is at the base of your neck, at the front, just behind the small hollow where your collar bones meet.

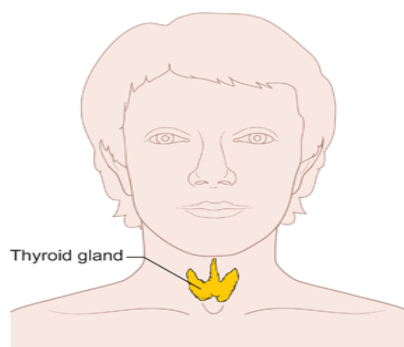


Diagram showing the position of the thyroid gland
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The thyroid

gland makes hormones that help to control the speed of the body processes – your metabolic rate. If your thyroid gland doesn't make enough of these hormones, you will put on weight and feel very tired and lacking in energy. If your thyroid gland makes too much, you will lose weight and have an increase in your appetite. You may also find it difficult to relax.

The thyroid also makes a hormone that helps to control the amount of calcium circulating in your blood. Calcium is important for your nervous system. Too much calcium can make you feel sick and drowsy. Too little can cause pins and needles, or jerking or twitching muscles.

Thyroid cancer risks and causes

Thyroid cancer is quite a rare cancer in the UK. Out of every 1,000 cancers diagnosed in the UK, fewer than 10 are thyroid cancers. We don't know what causes all cases of thyroid cancer, but there are some known risk factors.

The risk of thyroid cancer goes up with age in men until 75 years of age. For women, the risk stays fairly constant between the ages of 30 and 55 and then falls. Risk factors for thyroid cancer include



- A history of thyroid disease
- Exposure to radiation especially in childhood
- An inherited abnormal gene or a bowel condition called FAP
- Having low iodine levels

Thyroid cancer symptoms

The symptoms of thyroid cancer can include a lump in your neck, a sore throat, a hoarse voice, or difficulty swallowing, that last for more than a few weeks.

These symptoms are more likely to be caused by other illnesses, such as a throat infection. But if you have a hoarse voice or a sore throat for more than 3 weeks, you should see your doctor.

Only about 1 in 20 thyroid lumps are cancer. Cancerous thyroid lumps are not usually painful. But you need to get any lump checked by your doctor, especially if it suddenly gets bigger.

Medullary thyroid cancer can cause unusual symptoms, such as frequent loose bowel movements or becoming red in the face.

Thyroid cancer screening

Before screening for any type of cancer can be carried out, doctors must have an accurate test to use. The test must be reliable in picking up cancers that are there. And it must not give false positive results in people who do not have cancer. Screening is usually only used for illnesses that affect large numbers of people, or people known to be at a particularly high risk.

Thyroid cancer is rare. But medullary thyroid cancer can run in families. If you have a very close relative diagnosed with medullary thyroid cancer or a relative who

has a change in a gene known as the RET proto oncogene, your GP can refer you for tests for the abnormal gene. If you are referred for screening, a genetics counsellor will ask about your family medical history. If the abnormal gene is likely to run in your family, you may then have a blood test. If you do have the abnormal gene, you can have regular thyroid scans and blood tests. This will make sure that if you do develop thyroid cancer it will be found and treated as early as possible. Or you may have your thyroid gland removed to prevent a cancer developing.

Types of thyroid cancer

There are several types of thyroid cancer. The most common type is papillary thyroid cancer. It is more common in women, and usually diagnosed in younger people. This type of cancer usually grows slowly. But it can spread to lymph nodes in the neck or nearby.

Follicular thyroid cancer is most often diagnosed in young or middle aged people. It sometimes spreads to other parts of the body. If it does spread, it most often goes to the lungs or bones.

Medullary thyroid cancer is quite rare. About a quarter of these cancers (25%) are caused by a faulty gene running in the family. Medullary thyroid cancer can also spread to the lungs or bones.

About 1 in 6 thyroid cancers are the anaplastic type. These are usually diagnosed in older people, and are more common in women. They tend to grow more quickly than other types of thyroid cancer.



Guidelines for seeing a thyroid specialist

It can be very difficult for GPs to decide who may have a suspected cancer and who has something much less serious. But there are particular symptoms that mean your GP should refer you to a specialist straight away. If you have a type of noisy breathing called stridor which can be caused by swelling of your thyroid you should be seen straight away. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) says that you should see a specialist within 2 weeks if you have a thyroid lump or swelling and any of the following

- The thyroid lump or nodule is growing in size
- Previous radiotherapy to the neck area
- A history of an endocrine tumour (such as thyroid cancer) in the family
- Hoarseness or voice changes that your GP can't explain
- Other lumps in your neck, that could be enlarged lymph nodes
- You are aged 65 or over, or you are a child who has not yet gone through puberty

If you have a thyroid lump or swelling but don't have any of the features listed above, your GP should take blood tests to see how your thyroid is working. Your GP may send you to see a specialist, but not urgently.

If you think your GP is not taking your symptoms as seriously as you think they should, you could print out this page and take it to your appointment..

What to ask your doctor about thyroid cancer

- How would I know if I had thyroid cancer?
- A member of my family has thyroid cancer so am I at risk of getting it myself?
- Is there a gene test for thyroid cancer?
- Should I be screened?
- What screening tests are available?
- Are my children more at risk if I have had thyroid cancer?
- Is there anything I can do to reduce my risk of thyroid cancer?



Notes

More information

For more information about thyroid cancer, visit our website
<http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for cancer trials in the UK. You can view or print the information in a larger size if you need to.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on
0808 800 4040 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday

Adapted from Cancer Research UK's Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in August 2011. CancerHelp UK is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through CancerHelp UK and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. © Cancer Research UK 2011. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464) and in Scotland (SC041666).