

Iodine Deficiency FAQ

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Page 1 of 2

WHAT IS THE THYROID GLAND?

The thyroid gland located in the neck produces thyroid hormones which help the body use energy, stay warm and keep the brain, heart, muscles, and other organs working normally.

OVERVIEW

Iodine is essential for the production of thyroid hormone and must come from your diet, since the body does not make iodine. Iodine is found in various foods and is present naturally in soil and seawater. The U.S. is generally an iodine sufficient area, but many other parts of the world are considered iodine deficient. Approximately 30% of the world's population remains at risk for iodine deficiency.

1 SYMPTOMS

What are the symptoms of iodine deficiency?

All of the symptoms of iodine deficiency are related to its effect on the thyroid:

- **Goiter** – Without adequate iodine, the thyroid progressively enlarges (develops a goiter) as it tries to keep up with demand for thyroid hormone production. Worldwide, iodine deficiency is the most common cause of a goiter (see *Goiter brochure*). Within a goiter, nodules can develop. Patients with a large goiter may experience symptoms of choking, especially when lying down, and difficulty swallowing and breathing.
- **Hypothyroidism** – As the body's iodine levels fall, hypothyroidism may develop, since iodine is essential for making thyroid hormone. While this is uncommon in the U.S., iodine deficiency is the most common cause of hypothyroidism worldwide (see *Hypothyroidism brochure*).
- **Pregnancy-related problems** – Iodine deficiency is especially important in women who are pregnant or nursing their infants. Severe iodine deficiency in the mother has been associated with miscarriages, stillbirth, preterm delivery, and congenital abnormalities in their babies. Children of mothers with severe iodine deficiency during pregnancy can have intellectual disabilities and problems with growth, hearing, and speech. Even mild iodine deficiency during pregnancy, which may be present in some women in the U.S., may be associated with low intelligence in children.

2 CAUSES

What are the causes of iodine deficiency?

Since the body does not make iodine, it relies on the diet to have enough iodine. The availability of iodine in foods differs in various regions of the world. Individuals in the U.S. can maintain adequate iodine in their diet by using iodized table salt, by eating foods high in iodine, particularly dairy products, seafood, meat, some breads, and eggs, and by taking a multivitamin containing iodine. However, the amount of iodine in foods is not listed on food packaging in the U.S., and it can be difficult to identify sources of iodine in foods. See the *Iodine Deficiency Brochure* for a list of food items rich in iodine.

3 DIAGNOSIS

How is iodine deficiency diagnosed?

Iodine deficiency is diagnosed across populations and not specifically in individuals. Iodine levels can be measured in the blood or the urine. However, these tests are not good at accurately determining how much iodine is in your body and so cannot be used to diagnose iodine deficiency. When deficiency is seen in an entire population, it is best managed by ensuring that common foods that people eat contain sufficient levels of iodine.

(TREATMENT continues on page 2)

FURTHER READING

Further details on this and other thyroid-related topics are available in the patient information section on the American Thyroid Association® website at www.thyroid.org.



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Page 2 of 2

4 TREATMENT

What is the treatment for iodine deficiency?

As with many diseases, the best treatment is prevention. The U.S. Institute of Medicine has set the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for iodine in non-pregnant adults at 150 µg/day. Individuals who add salt to their food regularly during cooking or at the table should use iodized salt. In the U.S. and Canada one teaspoon of iodized salt contains approximately 250 µg iodine. Most U.S. iodine-containing multivitamins marketed for non-pregnant adults have at least 150 µg iodine, but only about 60% of the types of prenatal multivitamins in the U.S. contain iodine. During pregnancy, the RDA is 220 µg iodine/day and for breastfeeding women it is 290 µg iodine/day. The ATA® has recommended that all U.S. women who are planning pregnancy, pregnant, or breastfeeding take a prenatal multivitamin containing 150 µg iodine per day.



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