

Graves' Eye Disease

(Graves' Ophthalmopathy or Graves' Orbitopathy)

FAQ

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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.

1 CAUSES

What Causes Graves' eye disease?

Graves' ophthalmopathy is a problem that usually develops in people with an overactive thyroid caused by Graves' disease. Graves' disease is an autoimmune condition caused by antibodies directed against the thyroid, and also against the surface of the cells behind the eyes. Up to one half of people with Graves' disease develop eye symptoms.

2 SYMPTOMS

What are the symptoms of Graves' eye disease?

Symptoms include feeling of grittiness in the eyes, redness or inflammation, excessive tearing or dry eyes, and swelling of the eyelids. In more advanced disease, there may be forward displacement or bulging of the eyes (called proptosis), decreased movement of the eye, and rarely, loss of vision.

3 DIAGNOSIS

How is the diagnosis made?

Graves' eye disease is typically diagnosed after you have been diagnosed with *hyperthyroidism*, but it can sometimes occur even when the thyroid is not overactive. A doctor may examine the eyes and find swelling, inflammation, redness, or proptosis. A computed tomography (CT) scan or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan of the orbits may be helpful and show enlargement of the eye muscles.

4 TREATMENT

How is Graves' eye disease treated?

Graves' eye disease often improves on its own. When it does not, local measures such as artificial tears or wearing sunglasses can protect the eyes from exposure to air and light. More serious cases are treated with corticosteroid medications, such as prednisone, or other anti-inflammatory drugs. In severe cases, surgery, which is called *orbit decompression*, is needed.

Treatment of Graves' hyperthyroidism with medications or surgery does not affect Graves' eye disease, but treatment with radioiodine therapy may worsen eye disease, and should be avoided when possible if the eye disease is moderate or severe. If radioiodine is used in these cases, taking a corticosteroid drug at the time of the treatment may help prevent worsening of eye disease.

Smoking (and second hand exposure to smoke) is an important risk factor for Graves' eye disease, and those who smoke should try to quit.



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.

