Balancing Act

The thyroid gland is often described as being shaped like a bow tie and small in size. But the importance of the gland in maintaining the body's equilibrium is huge.

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Touch the front of your neck. Right below the skin and muscles there you'll find the thyroid gland.

This gland is one of eight contained in the body's endocrine system. (The others are the pituitary, pineal, parathyroids, thymus, pancreas, adrenals, and ovaries or testes.)

Endocrine glands produce the lion's share of the body's hormones. Hormones are chemical messengers that deliver instructions to our body's cells. Comparable to special assignment agents, endocrine system hormones control many of the body's critical life processes, such as growth, reproduction, immunity and homeostasis (the body's ability to maintain a balance of internal functions).

Thyroid gland hormones play a critical role in bone growth and the development of the brain and nervous system in children. In adults, the gland regulates other crucial functions, such as metabolism, heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature.

When the thyroid gland is either underactive or overactive, thyroid disease results. An underactive thyroid means that the gland fails to provide enough thyroxine, a hormone. This disease is called hypothyroidism. If the gland is over-active, it spills too much thyroxine into the bloodstream, causing hyperthyroidism. Both conditions wreak havoc on the body in major and minor ways.

Some symptoms of thyroid disease include gland enlargement (called a goiter), depression, weight gain or loss, nervousness, depression, irritability, fatigue, muscle weakness, dry skin and eyes, hair loss, protruding eyes and irregular menstrual periods.

Because these symptoms mimic those of other illnesses, thyroid disease is hard to diagnose. Doctors must administer special tests to check for it. And even then, says Kent Holtorf, MD, an endocrinologist and medical director of the Holtorf Medical Group, standard thyroid testing is not a simple science.

Thyroid hormone levels are very individual and complex, and often doctors need to run additional tests beyond the standard ones. When these challenges are combined with some doctors' egos

and a lack of time for quality individualized care, patients suffer, Holtorf says.

Thyroid gland testing and treatment require physicians who are dedicated to finding what's right for each patient. And if your physician isn't open-minded and willing to pursue solutions that are in your best interest, advises Holtorf, "Go find yourself another doctor."

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