



*The expert guide to
taking control of your condition*

Thyroid FOR DUMMIES®

Alan L. Rubin, MD

Co-author of Diabetes For Dummies

Dr Sarah Brewer

Co-author of Arthritis For Dummies

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by
Alan L. Rubin, MD
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Dedication

From Alan: This book is dedicated to my wife, Enid, who was there for every page. She smilingly let me do my work, sometimes into the wee hours of the morning, and missed many an opportunity to go out to dinner or a movie so that I could produce this book for you. If you have a fraction of the support in your life that she has given me, you are a lucky person, indeed.

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This book is written on the shoulders of thousands of men and women who made the discoveries, tried the medications, and held the committee meetings. Their accomplishments cannot possibly be given adequate acclaim. We owe them big time.

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Introduction



As part of my medical training, I (Sarah) was taught by an enlightened physician, Dr David Rubenstein of Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge. He encouraged me to do three things when evaluating a patient with puzzling symptoms: Think Drugs (so as not to miss unsuspected side effects), Think Dirty (to exclude syphilis, a disease that mimics so many other conditions) and Think Thyroid – because under and overactive thyroid problems are so often missed, especially in older people.

I went on to make a career out of thinking drugs and thinking thyroid (thinking dirty is no longer as necessary as it was just a generation ago).

For hundreds of years, people understood that a connection exists between a strange looking growth in the neck and certain diseases. Until about 60 years ago, confusion reigned as people with similar growths in their necks often have opposite symptoms. One group shows excessive excitement, nervousness, and shakiness, while the other has depression, sleepiness, and general loss of interest. What the two groups have in common is that they are mostly all women.

As recently as 60 years ago, scientists started to measure the chemicals coming from these growths (enlarged thyroid glands), and suddenly the whole picture began making sense. Now, many of the secrets of the thyroid gland and the hormones it makes are known, although it undoubtedly still has a few surprises up its sleeve.

This book explains that, with very rare exceptions, thyroid diseases, including thyroid cancer, are some of the most easily treated of all disorders. This fact is why many thyroid specialists say, 'If I have to have cancer, let's hope it's a thyroid cancer.'

This book reveals the thyroid in all its glory. As it regulates body temperature, one of the main symptoms of thyroid problems is feeling hot or feeling cold. Unfortunately, this symptom leads to a lot of confusion within the thyroid itself. So much so that the left lobe of the thyroid was once heard to say to the right lobe: 'Now I know it's summer – here comes another swallow.'

About This Book

The good news is that you don't need to read this book from cover to cover. Since the first few chapters are a general introduction to the thyroid, you may find it helpful to start in Part I, but if you prefer to go right to information about the thyroid condition that affects you, off you go to find it. If you run across any terms you don't understand, look for them in the glossary of terms in Appendix A.

This book is written as a sort of medical biography of a family – Toni, Stacy, Linda, Ken, and other members of the clan whom you meet during your reading. These folks illustrate the fact that thyroid disease often runs in families. You meet members of the family, as well as some other fine fictional characters, at the beginning of each chapter that describes a thyroid disease, so you have a good picture of the condition covered in that chapter.

Conventions Used in This Book

Although books such as this are easiest to read if they only use non-scientific terms, you and your doctor would soon find that you're speaking two different languages. Therefore, *Thyroid For Dummies* does use scientific terms, but these terms are explained in everyday English the first time you run across them. Plus, definitions of those difficult terms are available in the Glossary at the back of the book.

Three scientific terms come up over and over again in this book: thyroxine, triiodothyronine, and thyroid-stimulating hormone (also known as thyrotropin). These terms are explained in detail in Chapter 3. For these three words, abbreviations are used for easier reading: Thyroxine is T4, triiodothyronine is T3, and thyroid-stimulating hormone is TSH.

What You Don't Have to Read

Throughout the book, you find shaded boxes of text called sidebars. These contain interesting material but not essential to your understanding. If you don't care to go so deeply into a subject, skip the sidebars; you can still understand everything else.

Assumptions

This book assumes that you or someone you care about has a thyroid condition that is not yet treated or perhaps is not treated to your satisfaction. If this assumption doesn't apply to you, perhaps you suspect that you have a thyroid condition and want to determine whether you should see a doctor. Or perhaps you can't get your doctor to run the necessary tests to determine whether a thyroid problem exists. Regardless of your individual situation, this book has valuable information for you.

The material in the chapters does not make any assumptions about what you know regarding the thyroid and doesn't introduce any new terms without explaining what they are. If you already know a lot about the thyroid and its functions, you can still find new information that adds to your knowledge.

How This Book Is Organised

The book is divided into six parts to help you find out all you want to know about the thyroid gland.

Part I: Understanding Your Thyroid

So much (right and wrong) is written about the way the thyroid affects your mood that this issue is cleared up at the very beginning of the book. After you understand how the thyroid affects your emotions, you find out just what the thyroid is and what it does. Finally, in this part you learn about the medical tests that help to determine if something is wrong with your thyroid.

Part II: Treating Thyroid Problems

This part explains each of the conditions that affect the thyroid and how they affect you. After finishing this part of the book, you will know just about everything we know about thyroid disease, how to identify it, and how to treat it.

Part III: Managing Your Thyroid

Here you discover how medications can influence your thyroid function. We also explain thyroid infections, along with the worldwide problem of iodine

deficiency. I also show you why thyroid surgery is rarely done, and look at new treatments coming along. The final two chapters look at ways to improve your thyroid health – and your health in general – using diet, exercise, lifestyle choices, and complementary therapies.

Part IV: Considering Special Aspects of Thyroid Health

Thyroid problems often run in families and this part looks at the genetic basis of some thyroid diseases. Three groups of people also deserve special consideration in this book: pregnant women, children, and those over the age of 65 years. Thyroid conditions take unusual directions in these groups, so the chapters in this part address their unique difficulties.

Part V: The Part of Tens

Misinformation about the thyroid is rampant. This part aims to clear up some of that misinformation – though not all, as it accumulates faster than dust. The information also shows you how you can maximise your thyroid health.

Part VI: Appendices

In Appendix A, you find a glossary of medical terms that relate to the thyroid; you may want to bookmark it so you can go back and forth with ease as you read other chapters. Appendix B directs you to the best-of-the-best Web sites where you can get dependable facts to fill in any blank spots that remain after you've read this book.

Icons Used in This Book

Books in the *For Dummies* series feature icons in the margins, which direct you towards information that may be of particular interest or importance. Here's an explanation of what each icon in this book signifies:



When you see this icon, it means the information is essential. You want to ensure that you understand it.



This icon points out important information that can save you time and energy.



You find this icon next to paragraphs about the family members or other folks with specific thyroid conditions.



This icon alerts you to situations in which you may need to contact your doctor for some help.



This icon warns against potential problems you could encounter, such as the side effects of mixing medications.



This icon shows where medical terms are defined.

Where to Go from Here

Where you go from here depends upon your needs. If you want to understand how the thyroid works, head to Part I. If you or someone you know has a thyroid condition, you may want to pay particular attention to Part II. For help in maintaining good thyroid health, turn to Part III. If thyroid disease runs in your family, or if you're pregnant or have a child or parent with a thyroid disorder, Part IV is your next stop. In any case, as my mother used to say when she gave me a present, use this book in good health.

Part I

Understanding the Thyroid



"When he said he'd got trembling hands, rapid heartbeat, and was breaking out into a nervous sweat, I thought it was love—then he just said it was a thyroid problem!"

In this part . . .

What, exactly, is the thyroid gland, and what does it do? In this part, you discover how important this little gland in your neck really is, what function it plays in your body, and how to determine if it is functioning properly. We show you that your thyroid affects your mind as well as your body in critical ways.

Chapter 1

Bigging It Up: The Huge Role of a Little Gland

In This Chapter

- ▶ Crunching numbers: The incidence of thyroid disease
 - ▶ Recognising signs, symptoms, and risk factors of thyroid disease
 - ▶ Appreciating your thyroid's hard work
 - ▶ Giving a sick thyroid some TLC
 - ▶ Pinpointing times of life that pose special risks
-

Your thyroid is a little like Victor Meldrew, who often doesn't get the respect he feels he deserves. Anyone who watches prime-time TV knows the importance of other body parts – the heart, lungs, and wedding tackle sure get a lot of press. But unless you come face-to-face with a thyroid problem, chances are you don't hear much about what this little gland does and its vital importance to good health.

The fact that you're reading these words suggests you've encountered a thyroid problem personally. Perhaps you've recently had a thyroid condition diagnosed. Or maybe your husband, wife, mother, or friend is receiving treatment for a thyroid problem. If so, you've probably found out at least a little about this mysterious gland, and now you're looking for answers to the obvious questions that keep popping up in your mind:

- ✓ What causes this condition?
- ✓ What types of symptoms are related to this problem?
- ✓ How is this condition treated?
- ✓ What are the consequences of leaving it untreated?
- ✓ Does treatment end the problem forever?
- ✓ What can I (or my husband, wife, mother, or friend) do to help get back to optimal health?

This book aims to answer most of your questions. As doctors and researchers are constantly discovering new things about the thyroid, however, the information here is only as complete as our current knowledge. But if you're looking for concrete information about how the thyroid functions, and what to do when a problem occurs, you're holding the right paperback.

Discovering the Extent of the Problem

Thyroid disease – which is the collective term used for medical disorders of the thyroid, the majority of which are covered in this book – is one of the most common conditions in the world. Research indicates that thyroid disease affects more than 200 million people around the globe. In the United Kingdom alone, an estimated 4.5 million people have a thyroid problem out of a population of around 60.5 million. And that's just the ones who are properly diagnosed; a further two million people are believed to have over or underactive thyroid glands that remain unrecognised, although these cases are often mild.

The *incidence* of thyroid disease (the number of new cases identified annually) becomes even higher when careful autopsies are carried out on people who did not die of a thyroid condition. As many as 60 per cent of the people autopsied are found to have growths on the thyroid, and 17 per cent have small areas of cancer that were not detected during life.

These numbers are statistics, but thyroid disease affects individuals. You'll be encouraged to know that many people in the public eye have gone on to great accomplishments after being treated successfully for thyroid conditions. Some of the people you may recognise include:

- ✓ Olympic gold medal-winning sprinter, Gail Devers, had hyperthyroidism, while runner Carl Lewis had hypothyroidism.
- ✓ Author Isaac Asimov had thyroid cancer at the age of 52 and went on to live a further 20 years, eventually dying at the age of 72 from unrelated causes.
- ✓ Singer Rod Stewart had surgery to remove a thyroid growth.
- ✓ World-class golfer Ben Crenshaw had hyperthyroidism.
- ✓ Former United States President George Bush, former first lady Barbara Bush, and even their dog Millie, had hyperthyroidism – an unusual clustering that prompted extensive investigation of their water supply, although no cause was ever found.

While this list is far from exhaustive, it helps to drive home the point that, if diagnosed and treated, thyroid conditions don't need to hamper your lifestyle.