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What is the thyroid gland and what does it do?

The thyroid is a gland that is poorly understood. This guide has been written by Dr Ong to assist his endocrine thyroid patients to better understand the organ and their disorder.

What is the thyroid?

The thyroid gland looks like a butterfly. It derived its name from the Greek word “thyros” meaning “shield”.

It has 2 lobes - right and left, connected by a bridge called the isthmus. A normal thyroid weighs between 15-20 grams only, that's 7 to 10 grams (or mLs) per lobe.

The thyroid gland is situated at the bottom part of the neck, at the front, just above your collar-bones.

What does the thyroid do?

The thyroid controls the metabolism of our body. Heart rate, mental state, muscle activity, bone health, menstrual cycle, bowel activity are examples. It controls metabolism by making thyroid hormones.

What is a “toxic” thyroid?

Thyrotoxicosis, or overactivity, is when the thyroid puts out too much thyroid hormones. This causes the heart rate to speed up abnormally, tremor in the fingers, restlessness, excessive sweating, etc.

The most common cause of an overactive thyroid in Australia is Graves' disease.

How “bad” is Graves' disease?

Graves' disease happens when your body makes antibodies (biochemicals) that attack your thyroid. This is not normal. It causes the thyroid to be over-stimulated and as a result, produces too much hormones. Graves' disease causes symptoms of thyrotoxicosis and must be treated. In addition, Graves' disease can cause many problems with the eyes, which can lead to blindness.

What is a goitre?

A goitre is an enlarged thyroid gland.



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What problems can a goitre cause?

The thyroid is situated at the bottom of the neck. The neck does not have much space within it and unfortunately, one of the most common problem is a thyroid that keeps on growing and putting pressure on the vital structures in the neck. A goitre can also grow downwards into the chest and exert pressure there.

What is a multi-nodular goitre?

“Multi” means many, and “nodules” means lumps.

A “multi-nodular goitre” means a thyroid much larger than normal with many lumps. These lumps can be benign or potentially cancerous.

How do I know if my multinodular goitre has no cancer?

Good question!

It can sometimes be difficult to work this out due to the fact there are many lumps in a multinodular goitre. Dr Ong will discuss management of this at the consultation.

Do I need surgery to remove my thyroid?

Surgical removal of the thyroid is called a “thyroidectomy”. This can involve removing only half the gland, or the entire gland.

Thyroidectomy is recommended for some diseases of the thyroid. Examples include:

- Thyroid cancer
- Graves’ disease
- Multinodular goitre
- Suspicion of cancer in a thyroid nodule/lump
- Enlarging nodule/lump
- Needle biopsies of a nodule/lump which a convincing result could not be determined.

Dr Ong discusses management of these conditions in a formal surgical consultation at his rooms.

Call (02) 4610 7933 to make an appointment. You will need a referral from your GP.

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ENDOCRINE SURGEONS



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