

January is also thyroid awareness month. The thyroid gland is one of the body's endocrine systems. Many experts refer to the thyroid as the master gland. It is responsible for controlling metabolism in the body through messengers called hormones. Unfortunately, thyroid disorders are very common. Listed below are symptoms that you may be experiencing that could indicate a thyroid imbalance.

Symptoms of hypothyroidism are:

- Fatigue
- Constipation
- Dry skin
- Hair loss
- Cold hands and feet
- Depression
- Brain fog
- Weight gain

Symptoms of hyperthyroidism are:

- Anxiety
- Insomnia
- Diarrhea
- Heart palpitations
- Heat intolerance
- Sweating
- Weight loss
- Pressure behind the eyes
- Swelling in the neck or difficulty swallowing

Historically when screening for a thyroid imbalance, only TSH would be tested. TSH stands for thyroid stimulating hormone. This is the signal from the brain to the thyroid gland to make thyroid hormones. So testing TSH is an important piece of the puzzle. However, from a naturopathic perspective, it is more useful to look at TSH along with the hormones themselves free T3 and free T4. The free part of the test means that is the hormone that is unbound to a carrier protein and is bioavailable to the cells in the body. So to get an adequate assessment of thyroid function, minimally you should have TSH, free T3, and free T4 tested. It can also be important to test for thyroid antibodies. The two most common ones that are tested are thyroid peroxidase antibodies (TPO) and thyro-globulin antibodies (TGA). Both TPO and TGA can be elevated in autoimmune disorders: Hashimoto's and Graves' disease. The most common thyroid disorder in our country is Hashimoto's thyroiditis. Hashimoto's is a complex disease that is best managed by a well versed practitioner. Typically Hashimoto's will present with hypothyroidism. Graves' disease tends to present as hyperthyroidism.

One of the best things that you can do for thyroid health is to avoid gluten. The reason is that the gluten molecule gliadin can cause an immune mediated reaction in the body.

This reaction then initiates what's called "molecular mimicry" with the antibodies made to the thyroid. So eating gluten will cause the immune system to make antibodies to the thyroid too. Then you end up with a bigger autoimmune reaction and increase in thyroid symptoms. Going gluten free can feel a little daunting. Luckily, there are some great ways to avoid gluten without feeling like you're missing out on those favorite foods. Many companies are now making gluten free versions of breads, crackers, pasta, and others. These can be great treats when you need a substitute, but overall they are often still processed packaged foods that aren't really healthy daily choices. I like to think of them as occasional foods or special treats. So then the question is what can you eat?.

Gluten can be in foods that you might not often think of. So here's a list of foods that contain gluten:

- Wheat
- Barley
- Couscous
- Bulggar
- Rye
- Spelt
- Kamut
- Wheat germ
- \*Oats (do not contain gluten but if they're milled in a facility that does process wheat products they can be cross contaminated)

Substitutes that are healthier choices are rice, lentil, or black bean pastas; almond or coconut flour bread and muffin recipes; and zucchini noodles made with a spiralizer. Doing a quick Google search for paleo recipes will be gluten free and grain free. In the Portland area there are two yummy gluten free bakeries: New Cascadia and Back to Eden bakery. New Cascadia does more breads and Back to Eden does all kinds of yummy baked goods.

Some other ways to support thyroid health are with nutrients, supplements, herbs, and when necessary, medications.