

# **MANAGING YOUR GRAVES DISEASE**

## **What Is Graves Disease?**

The thyroid is an important endocrine gland found in the front of the neck. It produces substances (hormones) that act on metabolism and control mood, weight, and energy. Graves disease is an autoimmune disease that is the most common cause of too much thyroid hormone being produced (hyperthyroidism). It can affect both sexes but affects primarily women. An autoimmune disease is one in which the immune system of the body attacks itself and destroys healthy organs or tissues.

## **What Causes Graves Disease?**

The cause is substances called antibodies that stimulate the thyroid to enlarge (goiter) and make too much thyroid hormone. Eye disease can result. It may run in families but cannot be caught from someone else.

## **What Are the Symptoms of Graves Disease?**

Symptoms include problems with the thyroid, eyes, and rarely the skin. Eye problems include blurred vision, dryness, bulging of the eyeball (exophthalmos), or a staring look. Double vision and blindness can occur if Graves disease isn't treated.

An overactive thyroid gland results in fast or irregular heartbeat, high blood pressure, diarrhea, weight loss, increased sweating, and nervousness. Long-term complications include heart failure, bone loss (osteoporosis), and stroke.

## **How Is Graves Disease Diagnosed?**

The health care provider will make a diagnosis from the medical history, physical examination, and blood tests for thyroid function and antibody levels.

X-rays (ultrasound of the gland and radioactive iodine study) may also be done.

### **How Is Graves Disease Treated?**

High thyroid hormone levels and eye problems can both be treated.

Medicine, surgery, and/or radioactive iodine are used for high hormone levels. Medicines such as propylthiouracil (PTU) and methimazole prevent the thyroid from producing hormone. Other medicines that may help are beta-blockers (such as propranolol), which lower the heart rate and reduce the hormone's damaging effect on the heart. These drugs have side effects and should be used with care.

Radioactive iodine usually has few side effects, gives permanent results, and is very effective, but it cannot be used during pregnancy. It can be done as an outpatient or with a short hospital stay. The long-term risk is an underactive thyroid (hypothyroidism), so thyroid supplements may be needed lifelong after radioactive iodine treatment.

People who cannot have radiation therapy or cannot use oral antithyroid medicines may have surgery. Surgery risks include damage to vocal cord nerves and glands that regulate calcium.

An eye health care provider (ophthalmologist) should check for eye problems at least once yearly. Treatments for eye disease include laser therapy, surgery, eye drops, medications, and ointments.

### **DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Graves Disease**

- ✓ **DO** take your medicines exactly as prescribed. Skipping doses makes medicines useless.

- ✓ **DO** exercise daily if your health care provider says you can. Daily exercise can improve your well-being and health.
- ✓ **DO** visit your eye health care provider at least once yearly or more, if needed.
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you have palpitations, shortness of breath, chest pain, or sudden worsening of nervousness or jitters.
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you have eye pain or vision changes, sore throat, fever, chills, nausea, or vomiting.
- ⊗ **DON'T** skip medicine doses.
- ⊗ **DON'T** miss your laboratory test appointments.

FROM THE DESK OF

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the following source:

- Thyroid Foundation of America: Tel: (800) 832-8321; Website:  
<http://www.allthyroid.org>

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