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English  
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## How thyroid problems can affect your health

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NSW Multicultural Health Communication Service

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**NSW HEALTH**  
DEPARTMENT

## How thyroid problems can affect your health

When Lan first complained of fatigue, depression and weight gain, her doctor suggested she do more exercise, but when the problem persisted he referred her to a psychiatrist. But eventually Lan was diagnosed, not with depression, but with a problem affecting her thyroid gland - a small butterfly shaped gland, located in the neck below the Adam's apple.

Many people don't even know where this gland is, let alone what its function is, yet it influences many parts of the body and can cause a wide variety of symptoms. As in Lan's case, these symptoms can sometimes be mistaken for other problems such as depression, overwork or the effects of ageing. Thyroid disorders are common, affecting one in 20 people. They're especially common in women, with one in 14 women having thyroid problems at some time in their lives, especially during the 20s and 30s, and after the age of 60.

Although not usually life threatening, these problems can have a real affect on wellbeing. They can affect a person's moods, energy levels, tolerance of heat and cold and, in the case of women, their periods and even their fertility.

Lan's problem turned out to be a thyroid which was producing too little hormone. This has the effect of slowing the body down. The most common symptoms are fatigue, lethargy and unexplained weight gain of about three to four kilos. However, other symptoms can include forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating, dry, coarse hair, hair loss, loss of eyebrow hair, dry skin, heavy menstrual periods, brittle nails, constipation and feeling cold.

Some people, on the other hand, produce excess thyroid hormone which speeds the body up. This can cause weight loss and a rapid heartbeat. Other symptoms include feeling hot and sweaty, nervousness and irritability, insomnia, bulging eyes, an unblinking stare. Both conditions can be diagnosed with a simple blood test, and in most cases treatment with medication means people feel and function normally again.

Other changes that can happen to the thyroid gland include enlargement - but this doesn't necessarily cause any health problems. Sometimes small lumps called nodules can appear on the thyroid. Usually these aren't cancerous. It's important to have them checked with a biopsy (a test to examine cells in the lump) to make sure. Thyroid cancer which can occur at any age, can be very successfully treated if detected early. People who have been treated with radiotherapy for acne (a common treatment in the 1960s) may have an increased risk of thyroid cancer.

Thyroid problems can happen to anyone at any age. However, people with a family history of thyroid trouble have a higher risk. Some people born in South East Asia and the Middle East may also be more likely to have thyroid disorders because of lack of iodine in the diet in their home country. However this risk is usually reduced when they come to Australia.

Although using iodised salt can help prevent thyroid trouble, taking iodine tablets or kelp tablets can sometimes make these problems worse. Anyone who suspects they may have a thyroid problem should see their doctor.

For more information, contact the following support groups, the Australian Thyroid Foundation, PO Box 186, Westmead NSW 2145. Tel: (02) 9890 6962, or Thyroid Australia, PO Box 2575, Fitzroy Delivery Centre, VIC 3065. Tel: (03) 9561 2483.