

Thyroid Function Tests

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1 DEFINITION

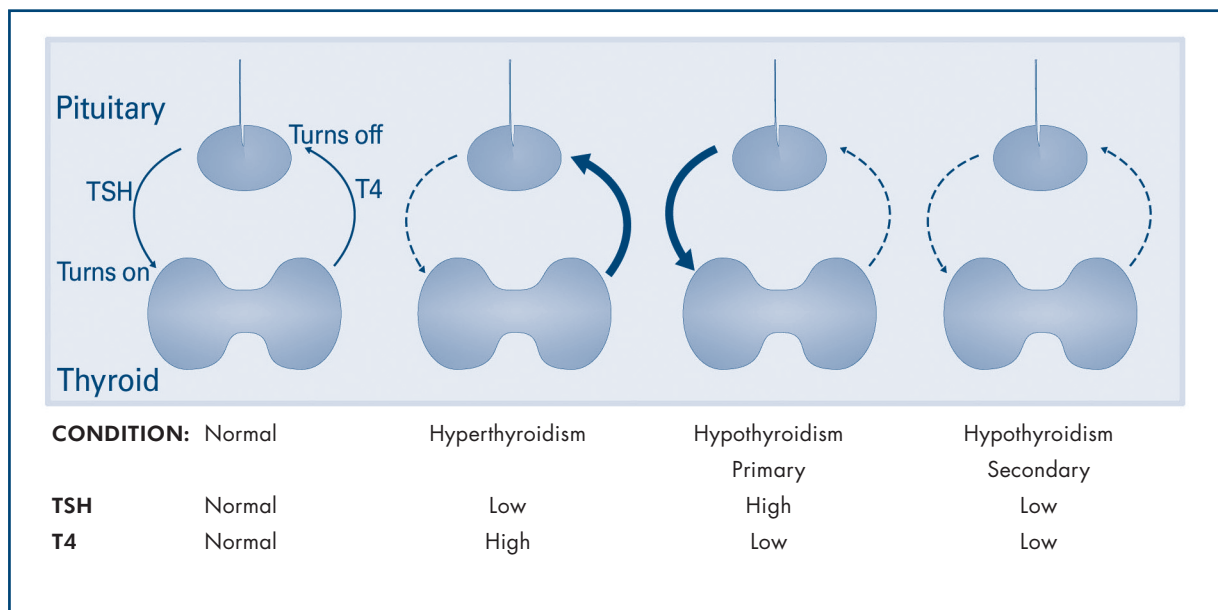
What is the thyroid?

The thyroid gland is a butterfly-shaped endocrine gland that is normally located in the lower front of the neck. The thyroid's job is to make thyroid hormone, which is secreted into the blood and then carried to every tissue in the body. Thyroid hormone is essential to help each cell in each tissue and organ to work right. For example, thyroid hormone helps the body use energy, stay warm, and keep the brain, heart, muscles, and other organs working as they should.

2 FUNCTION

How does the thyroid gland function?

The major thyroid hormone secreted by the thyroid gland is *thyroxine*, also called T4 because it contains four iodine atoms. To exert its effects, T4 is converted to triiodothyronine (T3) by the removal of an iodine atom. This occurs mainly in the liver and in certain tissues where T3 acts, such as in the brain. The amount of T4 produced by the thyroid gland is controlled by another hormone, which is made in the pituitary gland located at the base of the brain, called *thyroid stimulating hormone* (abbreviated *TSH*). The amount of TSH that the pituitary sends into the blood stream depends on the amount of T4 that the pituitary sees. If the pituitary sees very little T4, then it produces more TSH to tell the thyroid gland to produce more T4. Once the T4 in the blood stream goes above a certain level, the pituitary's production of TSH is shut off. In fact, the thyroid and pituitary act in many ways like a heater and a thermostat. When the heater is off and it becomes cold, the thermostat reads the temperature and turns on the heater. When the heat rises to an appropriate level, the thermostat senses this and turns off the heater. Thus, the thyroid and the pituitary, like a heater and thermostat, turn on and off. This is illustrated in the following figure:



3 TESTS

Tests to evaluate thyroid function:

Blood tests to measure TSH, T4 and T3 are readily available and widely used.

TSH Tests

The best way to initially test thyroid function is to measure the TSH level in a blood sample. A high TSH level indicates that the thyroid gland is failing because of a problem that is directly affecting the thyroid (primary hypothyroidism). The opposite situation, in which the TSH level is low, usually indicates that the person has an overactive thyroid that is producing too much thyroid hormone (hyperthyroidism). Occasionally, a low TSH may result from an abnormality in the pituitary gland, which prevents it from making enough TSH to stimulate the thyroid (secondary hypothyroidism). In most healthy individuals, a normal TSH value means that the thyroid is functioning normally.

T4 Tests

T4 circulates in the blood in two forms: 1) T4 bound to proteins that prevent the T4 from entering the various tissues that need thyroid hormone and 2) free T4, which does enter the various target tissues to exert its effects. The free T4 fraction is the most important to determine how the thyroid is functioning, and tests to measure this are called the *Free T4 (FT4)* and the *Free T4 Index (FT4I or FTI)*. Individuals who have hyperthyroidism will have an elevated FT4 or FTI, whereas patients with hypothyroidism will have a low level of FT4 or FTI. Combining the TSH test with the FT4 or FTI accurately determines how the thyroid gland is functioning. The finding of an elevated TSH and low FT4 or FTI indicates primary hypothyroidism due to disease in the thyroid gland. A low TSH and low FT4 or FTI indicates hypothyroidism due to a problem involving the pituitary gland. A low TSH with an elevated FT4 or FTI is found in individuals who have hyperthyroidism.

T3 Tests

T3 tests are often useful to diagnosis hyperthyroidism or to determine the severity of the hyperthyroidism. Patients who are hyperthyroid will have an elevated T3 level. In some individuals with a low TSH, only the T3 is elevated and the FT4 or FTI is normal. T3 testing rarely is helpful in the hypothyroid patient, since it is the last test to become abnormal. Patients can be severely hypothyroid with a high TSH and low FT4 or FTI, but have a normal T3.

Thyroid Antibody Tests

The immune system of the body normally protects us from foreign invaders such as bacteria and viruses by destroying these invaders with substances called antibodies produced by blood cells known as lymphocytes. In many patients with hypothyroidism or hyperthyroidism, lymphocytes make antibodies against their thyroid that either stimulate or damage the gland. Two common antibodies that cause thyroid problems are directed against thyroid cell proteins: thyroid peroxidase and thyroglobulin. Measuring levels of thyroid antibodies may help diagnose the cause of the thyroid problems. For example, positive anti-thyroid peroxidase and/or anti-thyroglobulin antibodies in a patient with hypothyroidism make a diagnosis of *Hashimoto's thyroiditis*. If the antibodies are positive in a hyperthyroid patient, the most likely diagnosis is *autoimmune thyroid disease*.

Non-blood tests

Radioactive iodine uptake

Because T4 contains much iodine, the thyroid gland must pull a large amount of iodine out from the blood stream in order for the gland to make an appropriate amount of T4. The thyroid has developed a very active mechanism for doing this. Therefore, this activity can be measured by having an individual swallow a small amount of iodine, which is radioactive. The radioactivity allows the doctor to track where the iodine molecules go. By measuring the amount of radioactivity that is taken up by the thyroid gland (radioactive iodine uptake, RAIU), doctors may determine whether the gland is functioning normally. A very high RAIU is seen in individuals whose thyroid gland is overactive (hyperthyroidism), while a low RAIU is seen when the thyroid gland is underactive (hypothyroidism). In addition to the radioactive iodine uptake, a *thyroid scan* may be obtained, which shows a picture of the thyroid gland (see [Thyroid Nodules brochure](#)).

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