

Unmasking Thyroid Health via the Iodine Connection

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

January 27, 2025

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Autoimmune thyroid disease is prevalent but often not fully understood, with many cases going undiagnosed due to the absence of positive thyroid antibodies in blood tests
- › Consuming more iodine than necessary plays a major role in thyroid dysfunction, and reducing iodine intake reverses these issues in many individuals
- › Thyroid medications are frequently overprescribed, with many patients not needing them. This leads to unnecessary health risks and side effects
- › A diet low in iodine often significantly improves thyroid health, emphasizing the importance of avoiding processed foods and certain personal care products
- › There is a need for a shift toward natural approaches in thyroid treatment, focusing on dietary changes and reducing reliance on medication

Thyroid disease is a complex condition that affects millions worldwide, influencing metabolism and development. Characterized by an imbalance in thyroid hormones, it encompasses hyperthyroidism, hypothyroidism and various structural abnormalities like goiters and nodules.

Common symptoms of thyroid disease include fatigue, inability to lose weight, dry skin, constipation, but these signs are often vague and easily mistaken for other health issues. This ambiguity frequently leads to delayed diagnoses, allowing the disease to progress unnoticed until more severe complications arise.

You might not realize it, but thyroid disorders are becoming increasingly prevalent across the globe. According to a study published in *Clinical Medicine Insights: Endocrinology and Diabetes*,¹ the incidence of thyroid conditions has surged over the past few decades, influenced by a range of demographic and geographic factors.

In Pakistan alone, over 9.7% of patients suffer from hypothyroidism, while 28.7% are affected by hyperthyroidism and a significant majority of 61.6% were euthyroid, meaning their thyroid function remained normal. These statistics highlight a growing public health concern that demands immediate attention and action.

Health Risks Linked to Thyroid Disease

If left untreated, thyroid disease leads to a host of other health problems. Chronic hypothyroidism results in osteoporosis, heart disease and impaired cognitive function, while hyperthyroidism causes atrial fibrillation, muscle weakness, and severe weight loss.

Additionally, structural abnormalities like multinodular goiters increase the risk of **thyroid cancer**, further complicating an already challenging condition. The silent progression of thyroid disorders underscores the necessity for regular screening and early intervention to prevent these life-altering outcomes.

Understanding the full impact of thyroid disease is essential for both individuals and health care providers. As the prevalence continues to climb, so does the need for effective diagnostic tools and accessible treatment options. By staying informed about the latest research and maintaining a proactive approach to thyroid health, you significantly reduce your risk of this often-overlooked endocrine disorder.

The stakes are high, and taking control of your thyroid health today will lead to a healthier, more balanced life tomorrow. Risk factors for thyroid disorders include age, gender, genetics and iodine – either too much or too little.

Environmental factors, such as exposure to certain chemicals and dietary habits, further complicate the picture. Stress and lifestyle choices, including diet and exercise, also

exacerbate or mitigate these underlying issues. Conventional treatments often rely on medications like levothyroxine, which are often overprescribed and do not address the root cause of the problem.

These medications lead to side effects such as increased risk of osteoporosis and cardiovascular issues. Additionally, the reliance on thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) levels for diagnosis is misleading, as TSH alone does not accurately reflect thyroid health.

TSH is influenced by various factors unrelated to thyroid function, such as age and other health conditions. This leads to misdiagnosis or overdiagnosis, with patients receiving unnecessary medication that doesn't address the root cause of their symptoms.

Moreover, the presence of thyroid antibodies, which can indicate autoimmune thyroid disease, is often overlooked in standard testing. These antibodies can be present even when TSH levels are normal, leading to symptoms that are not addressed by conventional treatments.

This oversight often results in prolonged suffering and ineffective management of the disease. Advanced panels that include free hormones and reverse T3 provide a more accurate picture of thyroid health but are seldom utilized in mainstream practice.

Factors Influencing the Development of Thyroid Disease

The path from underlying causes to thyroid disease involves complex biochemical processes. Excess iodine alters the structure of thyroglobulin, a protein in the thyroid, making it appear foreign to the immune system and triggering an autoimmune response.

This leads to inflammation and damage to thyroid tissue, resulting in conditions like Hashimoto's thyroiditis or Graves' disease. Genetic factors influence how efficiently your body processes iodine, affecting thyroid hormone production and regulation. While iodine is fundamental for thyroid hormone production, and **iodine deficiency** also puts your thyroid health at risk, a low-iodine diet may improve thyroid disease.

Expert Insights on Thyroid Health

In our recent interview, Dr. Alan Christianson, a board-certified naturopathic endocrinologist with a subspecialty in thyroid disease, shared information that is reshaping our understanding of thyroid health. As the founding president of the Endocrine Association of Naturopathic Physicians, Christianson provided valuable perspectives on the prevalence and management of thyroid disorders.²

Christianson, author of "The Thyroid Reset Diet," highlighted that autoimmune thyroid disease is the most common form of thyroid dysfunction, affecting about 10% of the adult population.³ Among these, Hashimoto's thyroiditis stands out as the most prevalent type.

Interestingly, half of those diagnosed with Hashimoto's do not display positive thyroid antibodies in blood tests, complicating diagnosis and treatment.⁴ This underscores the need for more comprehensive diagnostic approaches to accurately identify and manage thyroid conditions. The conversation also shed light on the alarming increase in thyroid cancer among adult women, now the fastest-growing type of cancer in this demographic.⁵

Further, Christianson pointed out that the main entry point for thyroid treatment is often subclinical hypothyroidism, a condition where thyroid hormone levels are slightly below normal but not enough to warrant immediate medication.⁶ This condition still often correlates with significant symptoms and increased disease risks, but prescribing medications in this population often backfires:

"Subclinical hypo[thyroidism] correlates with symptoms. It correlates with disease risks. And it could seem really logical to think that if that's true, then if we normalize those levels with medications, we should make those risks go away. But that's not what's panned out.

So, if you do medicate those people, even though they may have weight gain, fatigue, hair loss, classic thyroid symptoms, even though they've got more heart

disease, those things don't get better when medications are the only option. In fact, their overall risks and mortality rates go up."

Thyroid Medications Often Do More Harm Than Good

A major focus of Christianson's work is deprescribing — helping patients reduce or eliminate unnecessary thyroid medications.⁷ He explained that his efforts involve training doctors to recognize when thyroid medications do more harm than good.

According to Christianson, "The evidence is so strong that in almost all cases when thyroid medicines are given, they're not likely to be a benefit and they're more likely to be of harm."⁸ This perspective challenges the conventional reliance on medication as the first line of treatment, advocating for a more measured and individualized approach to thyroid health.

Christianson shared one striking example of successful thyroid management without long-term medication. He recounted a patient who had been on thyroid medication for 45 years but was able to come off all her medications and maintain her health independently.⁹

This case exemplifies the benefits of deprescribing and highlights the importance of personalized treatment plans. It serves as a testament to the effectiveness of comprehensive thyroid health management strategies that go beyond merely addressing symptoms with medication.

Dr. Christianson's approach also involves educating physicians about the risks associated with over-prescribing thyroid medications. By promoting awareness and understanding of when medication is necessary versus when it's harmful, health care providers offer better care to their patients.¹⁰ This educational effort is essential in shifting the medical community toward more holistic and evidence-based practices in thyroid health management.

In summary, Dr. Alan Christianson's insights reveal the complexities of thyroid health and the need for a multifaceted approach to treatment. From recognizing the prevalence of

autoimmune thyroid disease and the impact of genetics to advocating for deprescribing and dietary changes, his contributions are paving the way for improved thyroid health outcomes.¹¹

As our understanding of thyroid function continues to evolve, these research-backed strategies offer hope for those affected by thyroid disorders.

The Importance of Optimized Iodine Intake

Genetics play a significant role in thyroid disease, particularly variations in iodine metabolism.¹² Christianson emphasized that gene variations influence how effectively your body processes iodine and explained the importance of maintaining a balanced iodine intake, noting that excessive iodine leads to thyroid dysfunction, while insufficient levels cause goiter and other thyroid-related issues.

He highlighted that for those with a genetic predisposition to thyroid conditions, as indicated by a personal or family history of thyroid disease, keeping iodine intake below 200 micrograms per day is important to avoid triggering thyroid problems.¹³ Further, Christianson noted:

"We used to think that once autoimmune disease got started, it was just the horse was out of the barn and the train left the station and it kept on going. But what happens now we know is that it requires a certain amount of ongoing exposure to perpetuate it.

And there have been about half a dozen studies in which people were given deliberate low-iodine diets ... within about three months of being deliberately taken below roughly 100 micrograms from all sources, about half of people with overt disease got better."

As such, dietary factors are intricately involved in managing thyroid health. Christianson identified processed grains, which are high in iodine, as a major source of thyroid issues for many people.¹⁴ By reducing the intake of processed grains and focusing on whole, unprocessed foods, individuals support their thyroid health more effectively. Even

personal care products are often problematic, as many contain iodine in the form of polyvinylpyrrolidone (PVP). According to Christianson:

"It's a good antioxidant. It keeps things from getting rancid. It makes lotion stay smooth, but we absorb it. Natural products call it kelp extract ... but it's PVP. It's the same thing. And about 1% to 3% of many conditioners or body lotions contains that. And it'll absorb about 12% of PVP as iodine. About 4% gets in the bloodstream."

Even Organic Raw Dairy Often Contains Iodine

For individuals striving to minimize their iodine intake, it's important to recognize that even organic raw dairy is often a significant source. Many consumers assume that organic raw milk is entirely free from additives and residues, but this isn't always the case. The presence of iodine in these products is quite prevalent, primarily due to the use of iodine-based disinfectants on the teats of cows during the milking process.

This practice is widespread among dairy farmers, including those who adhere to organic standards, as it effectively prevents infections like mastitis. Organic farmers often rely on iodine sanitizers to maintain herd health, inadvertently introducing iodine residues into the milk.

Even though organic practices emphasize natural and sustainable methods, the necessity of using these disinfectants means that raw milk from organic sources often still contain significant levels of iodine, typically ranging from 30 to 50 micrograms per serving, according to Christianson.

"There's a vicious cycle," he says. "Iodine is a skin irritant. So, it produces mastitis. And then you need more and more iodine to manage the mastitis." The issue is exacerbated by other sources of iodine within the dairy supply chain. For instance, the use of iodine-fortified feeds and fish meal as protein sources for cattle contributes additional iodine to the milk.

These factors collectively ensure that iodine remains a common component in both organic and conventional dairy products. While organic raw milk from grass fed cows generally has lower iodine levels compared to nonorganic alternatives, the persistent use of iodine sanitizers means that consumers cannot assume it's completely free from this element.

Being informed about the sources of iodine in milk allows you to make more educated choices, such as seeking out dairy producers who prioritize reducing or eliminating iodine use in their operations. By understanding the nuances behind iodine presence in organic raw milk, it allows you to make smarter dietary choices to support optimal health and well-being.

However, keep in mind that, for most people, processed grains are the primary contributor of iodine and a more significant dietary concern than raw milk.

Natural Solutions for Optimal Thyroid Function

Taking control of your thyroid health involves addressing the root causes rather than merely managing symptoms. Modern environmental factors and lifestyle choices pose significant challenges to thyroid function. However, by redefining conventional thyroid diagnosis and treatment approaches and implementing targeted natural interventions, you restore balance and vitality.

- 1. Lower your iodine intake during the reset stage** — Christianson recommends following a low-iodine diet, including avoiding processed grains, to reset your thyroid health. Safe, low-iodine foods include fruits and vegetables, animal proteins and iodine-free salt. Once implemented, he says, most people see significant changes in thyroid autoimmunity or thyroid levels within three months:

"During that first couple months ... the target's roughly less than 100 micrograms. You want to be aware of your personal care products. You want to be aware of iodine in supplements. Tough thing. But there are some thyroid support products that have even that have hidden sources of iodine.

Some even have hidden amounts of thyroid hormone in them, synthetic thyroid hormone added to them ... so being aware of all those total sources, keeping it lower."

After the initial low-iodine period, Christianson recommends moving to a maintenance phase. "That's where you can add in some of those really healthy, moderate-iodine foods," he says, such as organic dairy products.

- 2. Balance your diet and lifestyle to support natural thyroid recovery** — A balanced diet rich in the right carbohydrates — and free of ultraprocessed foods — supports cellular energy production, which is necessary for thyroid health. Excess polyunsaturated fat (PUFA) intake, including **linoleic acid** in seed oils, is a major culprit, as PUFAs interfere with your cell's ability to use active thyroid hormone.

Incorporating a variety of nutrient-dense foods ensures that your body receives the essential vitamins and minerals necessary for optimal thyroid function. Additionally, consistent, moderate exercise enhances metabolic rate and supports thyroid function.

- 3. Avoid environmental toxins** — Exposure to toxins like **endocrine-disrupting chemicals** (EDCs) in plastics also interferes with thyroid hormone production and function, leading to a range of metabolic and endocrine issues.

Using filtered water, avoiding the use of chemicals in your home and being mindful of the products you apply to your skin will help you reduce your exposure. Avoiding these harmful substances will significantly improve thyroid health and prevent further hormonal disruptions.

- 4. Restore hormonal balance** — Support the vital conversion of T4 to T3 thyroid hormone by addressing factors that impede this process. Reduce stress to lower cortisol levels, which inhibit hormone conversion, and monitor estrogen levels to prevent excess estrogen from blocking this conversion. Incorporate healthy saturated fats from sources like tallow while avoiding processed vegetable and seed oils high in inflammatory omega-6 fats.

Additionally, engage in regular physical activity tailored to your metabolic needs and ensure [adequate sun exposure](#) – once you've eliminated seed oils from your diet – to promote cellular energy production. Progesterone also plays a role in supporting thyroid function. By addressing progesterone deficiency, hormonal balance is restored, creating a supportive environment for thyroid activity.

Progesterone supports adrenal function, which in turn supports thyroid function. Without adequate progesterone, your adrenal glands cannot effectively support the thyroid, leading to a cascade of metabolic issues. Supplementing natural progesterone helps stabilize hormonal balance, reduce anxiety, improve sleep quality and enhance overall thyroid function.

Incorporating progesterone into a thyroid health regimen is essential for ensuring that all aspects of hormonal balance are addressed, thereby optimizing thyroid function and overall metabolic health. Coconut oil, rich in medium-chain triglycerides and steroidal molecules, also supports the conversion of T4 to the active T3 form, thereby enhancing thyroid function and overall energy metabolism.

Including coconut oil in your diet is another simple yet effective strategy to support thyroid health. Its unique composition not only provides a source of healthy fats but also supports the biochemical processes necessary for optimal thyroid hormone activity. By adopting these comprehensive lifestyle changes, you enhance hormone conversion and support overall thyroid function naturally.

Sources and References

- [1 Clinical Medicine Insights: Endocrinology and Diabetes. 2024;17](#)
- [2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 Dr. Mercola Interviews Dr. Alan Christianson on Thyroid Health](#)