

GETTING IT IN THE NECK

GAUNT, STRESSED, OVERTIRED? LIKE DANNII MINOGUE AND LORNA V, YOU MAY HAVE AN UNDERACTIVE THYROID

When Dannii Minogue explained why she had lost so much weight earlier this year and looked shattered, it transpired she had been suffering from an underactive thyroid gland. Sceptics pointed out that the condition, also known as hypothyroidism, is usually associated with piling on the pounds. But I can vouch for Minogue. I am also one of the few women who don't balloon in weight with this common problem, which is notoriously tricky to diagnose.

The thyroid is a gland in the neck that produces hormones that regulate our metabolism. When there aren't enough of these hormones, the body slows down, so most people put on weight and feel exhausted. Other symptoms include dry skin, coarse hair, fragile nails, memory problems and depression. In other words, a host of miserable, but ordinary, symptoms that GPs frequently dismiss as common-or-garden stress and poor lifestyle.

It's a condition that affects more women than men: officially, one in 50 in the UK suffers from hypothyroidism. The figures rise with age. According to the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists, 10% of women aged 45-54 will be affected. By the age of 74, the figure is one in five.

The process of diagnosis can be lengthy and difficult. Diagnosing the condition involves interpreting two blood tests; and since British guidelines recommend a wider "normal" range than America and Europe, fewer people here are classed as having hypothyroidism and are thus able to get treatment.

It took two years, appointments with numerous GPs, and two sessions with an endocrinologist to get my diagnosis. My blood tests were borderline. I was given a low dose of the hormone thyroxine, which is used to treat the disorder, and referred to a specialist. Doctors are generally cautious about doling out thyroxine as it can lead to cardiac failure if wrongly prescribed. The British Thyroid Association does not support its use unless strongly justified by blood tests — a problem for borderline cases such as mine.

The hospital endocrinologist also found that my levels of cortisol (the steroid hormone released by the adrenal glands in response to stress) were low. This was to be expected. Shabir Daya, a pharmacist and co-founder of Victoria Health, explains that for women, there is a link between the adrenals and the thyroid. "The adrenals are the body's main stress-reducing and energising glands. The decrease in female hormones from the age of 35 puts stress on the adrenal glands, and as these communicate with the thyroid, there can be the knock-on effect of hypothyroidism."

My low cortisol also accounted for my unexplained weight loss. Dr Cecilia Tregear, from the Wimpole Skin Care Centre in London, says: "Cortisol-deficient patients tend to be very skinny, as the body burns a lot of fat to make cortisol. Often, this fat goes straight from the face, so patients lose their cheeks. Minogue probably falls into the small percentage of women with a deficiency of cortisol, although it's often hard to spot this condition in

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HORMONE CHANGES SUCH AS THOSE IN PREGNANCY MAY UNMASK A THYROID PROBLEM



celebrities who may have had fillers and Botox. Minogue burns the candle at both ends. She has started a business and has had a baby. For people who are very active, if the thyroid is not delivering energy, they will actually lose weight as they have to get the energy from somewhere other than the thyroid." And despite my weight loss, I was also found to have high cholesterol, which can be an all-important deciding factor in borderline cases such as mine.

Though unusual in losing weight, Minogue isn't unique in developing hypothyroidism post-pregnancy. In a recent British study, 10% of women suffering from depression after childbirth, were diagnosed with hypothyroidism. "Hormone changes such as those in menopause, pregnancy or childbirth may unmask a thyroid problem or even precipitate it," says Dr John Moran of the Holistic Medical Clinic in London. "It's not surprising, as the whole metabolism gets stressed."

Tregear notes that the symptoms of hypothyroidism vary according to age groups. "In young people, the main issues are memory problems, lack of energy and low libido. In your forties, fifties and sixties, weight gain, concentration problems and ageing prematurely are more frequent."

The most common symptom across the board, says Dr Marion Gluck, who runs a clinic specialising in hormonal imbalances, is extreme fatigue. "It happens with both under- and overactive thyroids — that unexplained too-tired feeling, along with mood swings and feeling overwhelmed by life."

I got there eventually on the NHS, and I'm now monitored closely. Within weeks of taking the lowest dose of thyroxine, I started to feel better, and within a couple of months I was relieved to feel my normal self once again. I'm now evangelical about telling every woman to ask for a thyroid test. Don't accept a diagnosis of FFF (GP-speak for "Fat, female and 40") when you know there's something wrong. ●

Dannii Minogue lost weight with an underactive thyroid — an unusual case

