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Celiac Disease and Thyroid Conditions

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Celiac disease and thyroid disease: the connection

Researchers have found autoimmune thyroid diseases to be more common in people with celiac disease than in the general population. Similarly, individuals who have autoimmune thyroid disease are more likely to develop celiac disease compared to the general population. Thyroid disease is often diagnosed before celiac disease because it may be more commonly tested for than is celiac disease.

The reasons for this relationship are not entirely clear, but these are the known facts:

- There is a genetic link among many autoimmune diseases.
- It is likely that celiac disease and thyroid disease occur together because they are both relatively common autoimmune diseases.
- There is evidence that celiac disease may predispose individuals to develop other autoimmune diseases, such as thyroid disease.

What does the thyroid gland do?

The thyroid is a small gland just below the Adam's apple. This gland produces thyroid hormones whose main job is to regulate metabolism. These hormones affect every system in the body and help to control its functions, for example, temperature regulation.

Thyroid Disease

- If the thyroid gland stops producing adequate amounts of hormones, this causes body processes to slow down. This is called **hypothyroidism**.
- If the thyroid begins to over-produce hormones it causes the body's metabolism to significantly increase. This is called **hyperthyroidism**.
- Hashimoto's disease and Graves' Disease are two common causes of hypothyroidism and hyperthyroidism (respectively). Both are autoimmune diseases.

Hashimoto's Disease (also called Chronic Lymphocytic Thyroiditis)

- The body's immune system attacks the thyroid and causes a decrease in production of thyroid hormone (hypothyroidism).
- Hypothyroidism can exist for years with no symptoms appearing until the body becomes over-stressed, e.g. after a pregnancy or a traumatic illness.
- Symptoms can be very subtle and non-specific, mimicking other illnesses, so it is important to consult with your physician about having a TSH thyroid test if you experience the following symptoms:
 - Tiredness
 - Weight gain
 - Dry skin
 - Often feeling cold and low body temperature
 - Coarse, dry hair or hair loss
 - Enlarged thyroid gland in the neck
 - High cholesterol
 - Dizziness
 - Depression
 - Muscle cramps

- Constipation
- Decreased ability to concentrate or difficulty remembering things
- Slowed heartbeat
- Yellowish skin
- Nausea
- Lack of coordination

Graves' Disease

- The body's immune system attacks the thyroid and causes it to produce too much thyroid hormone (hyperthyroidism).
- Hyperthyroidism is not as common as hypothyroidism.
- Common Symptoms:
 - Weight Loss
 - Rapid pulse
 - Protruding eyes
 - Feeling too warm
 - Nervousness
 - Insomnia
 - Irritability
 - Heart palpitations
 - Diarrhea
 - Muscle weakness

Testing

- Initial testing is done by measuring TSH (thyroid stimulating hormone). This is currently the best screening test for thyroid function. After reviewing these results, a doctor may want to do more specific thyroid tests to determine whether any problem is of autoimmune origin.

Treatment

- If a person is diagnosed with hypothyroidism, the doctor will generally prescribe a thyroid hormone replacement. There are different strengths of hormone replacement, so finding the right dosage may take some time.
- Treatment for hyperthyroidism is more complex. It usually is treated with anti-thyroid drugs, but if the condition persists, radioactive iodine or surgery may be needed.
- If a person does not respond to thyroid medication, testing for celiac disease should be considered, as CD could cause medication to be malabsorbed.

Hypothyroidism and the gluten-free diet (GFD)

- Some patients with celiac disease have reported a lower need for thyroid hormone replacement after being on the gluten-free diet for a period of time. One reason is that being on a gluten-free diet allows the small intestine to heal, and therefore thyroid medication may be better absorbed. The gluten-free diet may also cause a lower inflammatory response and reduce the inflammation of the thyroid gland.

This educational bulletin has been produced by the Gluten Intolerance Group of North America, a registered 501(c)3 organization. Learn more about GIG at www.gluten.org.

GIG is on a mission to make life easier for everyone living gluten-free.

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