

BY SHARI HELD

Health Issues That Hit Women Harder

Females are at higher risk for a host of medical conditions, from headaches to serious autoimmune disorders.



Women know they're much more likely than men to get breast cancer. But there are lots of medical issues that you might not guess are more common to women. Sometimes the explanation is biological—for instance, hormones that might cause depression. Some theories point to environmental factors—challenges more typical of the female experience may lead to depression and anxiety. Here are seven conditions women should watch for.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

Anxiety you just can't shake affects twice as many women as men. "People with GAD feel tense and worried much or all of the time," says Marina Behrad, M.D., a family practice physician with Castleton Family Physicians, affiliated with Community Physicians of Indiana. Left untreated, anxiety can lead to headaches, colitis, asthma, hypertension, heart disease, ulcers, and headaches.

Risk factors: If you expect things to be perfect, are tired or overwhelmed, had stressful or harmful experiences including childhood abuse, have a medical illness, or are withdrawing from alcohol or drugs, you're prone to GAD. It also appears to run in families.

Symptoms: Panic attacks, phobias, tension, and worry are common symptoms of GAD. Other symptoms include restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, muscle tension, trouble sleeping, shakiness, headaches, pounding heart, shortness of breath, excessive sweating, and depression. "These symptoms can interfere with daily life," says Dr. Behrad. "If you experience them, contact your doctor."

Treatment: Anti-anxiety drugs and antidepressants may help, and therapy is often an important part of the solution.

Hypothyroidism

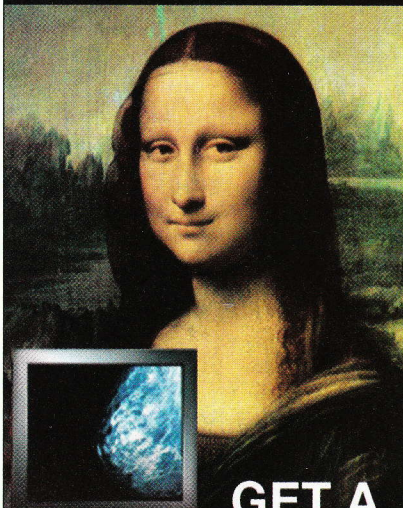
Underactive thyroid glands are surprisingly common and easy to treat—but potentially deadly if left unchecked. They're also five times more prevalent among women than men.

"Hypothyroidism is the most common thyroid condition we encounter," says H.N. Nagaraja, M.D., an endocrinologist with Noblesville Diabetes and Endocrinology and Riverview Medical Group. The butterfly-shaped gland at the front of your throat is like the engine of a car, generating energy for your whole body, says Dr. Nagaraja. It helps all cells in the body perform their functions at a certain rate. If you don't have enough thyroid hormone, your metabolism, heart rate and other processes will slow down. You'll become seriously fatigued, and may even develop life-threatening complications.

Risk factors: Hypothyroidism is more common in people age 35 and older, but the most important risk factor is having a relative with thyroid dysfunction.

Symptoms: Weight gain, brittle nails, dry skin, thinning hair, or hair loss are common tip-offs to a thyroid dysfunction. Other symptoms include constipation, fatigue, muscle soreness, heavy menstrual flow, and cold intolerance. Fertility problems can be an indicator, too. "If someone can't get pregnant, the first thing we check is the TSH, or Thyroid Stimulating Hormone," says Dr. Nagaraja.

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"If someone has abnormal thyroid levels, she will not be able to conceive."

Treatment: A blood test can determine whether you have hypothyroidism, which is easily treated with levothyroxine (brand names include Levothroid, Levoxyl and Synthroid). The pills have no known side effects and can be taken for life. Your doctor may run blood tests a few times a year to make sure your thyroid levels stay steady.

Hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism is an overactive thyroid gland, much more common in women. "People are happy because they can eat anything they want, and they still lose weight," says Dr. Nagaraja. "But they shouldn't be, because it's not a healthy way to lose weight."

Risk factors: A history, or family history, of autoimmune disorders.

Symptoms: Weight loss, tremors, palpitations, diarrhea, and difficulty sleeping. Symptoms gradually become worse.

Treatment: Medication or surgery.

Depression

"Depression is not the same as feeling sad when bad things happen," says Dr. Behrad. "If sadness lasts for days or weeks, makes it hard to work or do things with family or friends or involves thoughts of suicide, depression is present. It affects about 80 percent of people at some point, and can occur at any age."

Risk factors: The cause of depression is unknown. Hormones, work overload, and sexual abuse are thought to contribute to the gender difference—women are twice as likely as men to experience depression. Other possible factors include chemical imbalances in the brain; genetic, environmental or developmental events; biological and psychological issues; and certain medical conditions, such as thyroid disease and stroke. Alcohol and downers may make depression worse.

Symptoms: Sleep disorders such as insomnia, waking up early for no reason, or sleeping the day away are all typical with depression. So are eating issues—too much food or too little. Maybe you've lost interest in friends, family, and things you used to enjoy, including sex. You may have a hard time concentrating and become agitated or restless—or the op-

posite, moving and speaking very slowly. Or maybe you cry for no reason and even have suicidal or homicidal thoughts.

Treatment: Mild depression may be kept under control with a few lifestyle changes, such as lowering stress and increasing your leisure time and exercise, says Dr. Behrad. But if you can't shake the blues, or you experience more severe symptoms, call your doctor. Drugs, herbal remedies, and therapy are likely treatment options.

Migraines

Women are three times more likely to get migraines, severe headaches often accompanied by nausea or blurry vision.

Risk factors: Some of it's hereditary, says Dr. Behrad. "The cause is unknown, but 60 to 80 percent of people inherit the tendency to have migraines." Potential triggers include stress, too little or too much sleep, your menstrual cycle, alcohol, birth control pills, fatigue, certain foods, hunger, head trauma, and weather changes. **Symptoms:** "Headache symptoms typically begin gradually, intensify over a short period of time, and can last hours to days without treatment," says Lisa Altuglu, M.D., who practices at South 31 Family Care and St. Francis' Indianapolis hospitals. The pain is often throbbing and severe, and you may be able to pinpoint it to one spot. Migraine indicators include nausea, vomiting, light and sound sensitivity, and head pain that gets worse when you move. A lot of people experience nasal stuffiness, a runny nose, or teary eyes, which can be confused for a sinus headache, says Dr. Altuglu.

Treatment: Dr. Behrad suggests applying a cold cloth or ice pack to your head (or splashing your face with cold water) and lying down in a quiet, dark room with pillows under your head. Try to minimize noise, light, and odors, especially cooking smells. If the pain is really bad, you should get help right away. "A sudden onset of a severe incapacitating headache, especially if associated with any neurological symptoms, needs to be evaluated in the emergency department immediately," says Dr. Altuglu.

If you develop a pattern of headaches, your doctor may prescribe you medication that you take either daily or at the first sign of an impending migraine.

Osteoporosis

According to the National Osteoporosis Foundation, 10 million Americans have the condition that causes the bones to become thin and break more easily. Women make up 80 percent of them.

Risk factors: "Osteoporosis most often occurs after menopause when estrogen levels drop, but other conditions can increase your risk as well," says Dr. Altuglu. They include certain metabolic conditions, medications such as steroids and seizure medications, celiac disease, and very low body weight.

Symptoms: There usually aren't any.

Treatment: Based on the results of your bone density test, your doctor may recommend medication, says Dr. Altuglu. Lifestyle changes that may help include giving up smoking; drinking less alcohol, soda, and caffeinated beverages; doing weight-bearing exercises such as walking; and adding 1500 mg of calcium and 800 IU of vitamin D to your diet.

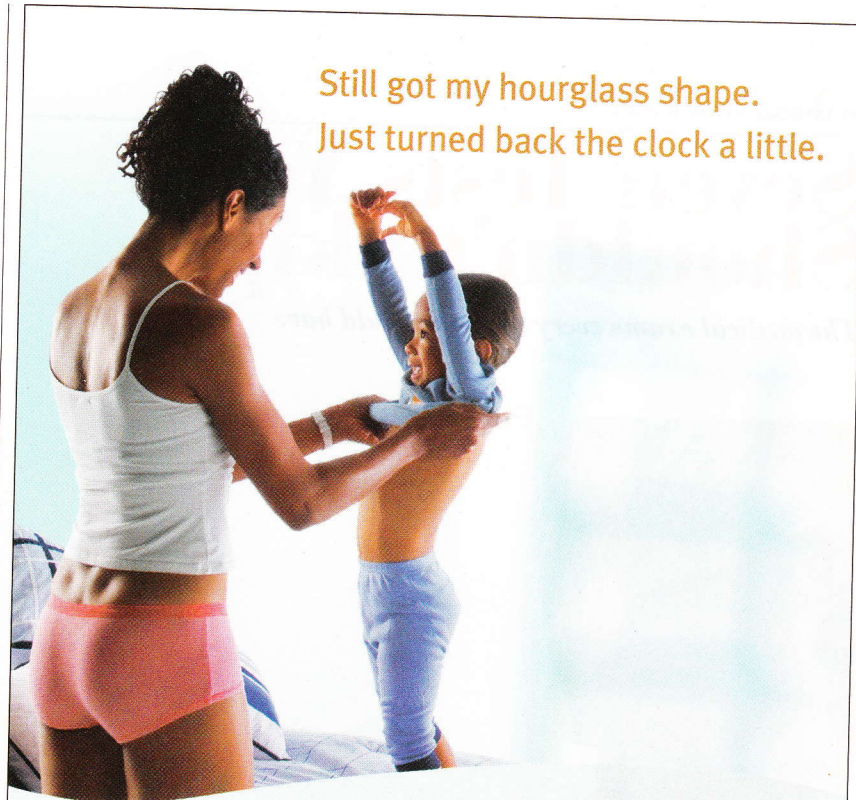
Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE)

SLE, a disease that causes inflammation in connective tissue, can affect joints, skin, lungs, the heart, blood vessels, kidneys, the nervous system, and blood cells. The disease occurs in about 1 in 2,000 people—African Americans and people of Asian and Hispanic ancestry more often than Caucasians, and women five times more often than men.

Risk factors: The cause of SLE is unknown, but heredity and environmental factors may increase your risk.

Symptoms: Depends on which organ is involved. "The first symptoms may be fatigue and joint pain, swelling, or stiffness, usually in hands, wrists, and knees," says Dr. Behrad. "People may have a rash on sun-exposed parts of the body, often the cheeks and nose." Breathing may be painful, and spasms might occur in the blood vessels along with pain and discoloration in the fingers, toes, ears, and nose. SLE can also affect your memory and mood, causing stress or confusion.

Treatment: There's no permanent cure for SLE. The goal of treatment is to relieve the symptoms and protect your organs. Your doctor might recommend you rest or exercise more, avoid the sun, or take aspirin or prescription drugs. ●



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