Ask an Expert: Can goiters be treated without iodine?

Posted by rhiggs January 28, 2009 00:00AM

Categories: Impact, Netwellness

Q. I have been diagnosed with a goiter and my doctor said that it needs to be treated. My concerns are that I'm not completely convinced the goiter needs treatment and I have a severe allergic reaction to iodine (anaphylaxis). When does a goiter need treatment, and are there other options besides iodine?

A: A goiter is simply a thyroid gland that has grown to an abnormally large size.

Some patients with goiter have a thyroid gland that is making too little thyroid hormone. An example of this would be Hashimoto’s thyroiditis.

Other patients with an abnormally large thyroid may have a gland that is overactive. For instance, patients with Graves’ disease usually have an enlarged thyroid.

However, many people have a goiter and yet have perfectly normal thyroid hormone levels in their blood. The thyroid is enlarged but it is making a normal amount of thyroid hormone.

Treating Goiters That Don’t Affect Hormone Levels

A goiter may not need treatment if it is small, not growing, and doesn’t affect thyroid levels.

Treatment of these goiters would be necessary for the following reasons:

• Size inhibits function of parts of the neck
• Growth is fast enough to cause problems in the near future
• Uninsightly appearance

If the thyroid were large enough to press on the swallowing tube, breathing tube, or nerve to the voice box, this pressure might cause difficulty swallowing, shortness of breath, or hoarseness in the voice. So even if there are no symptoms, it is appropriate to operate on a goiter that is so large that it compressed the breathing tube or pushed it aside (usually it would take at CT scan to find that).

It might be important to treat a goiter that was growing in order to keep it from eventually pressing on these important structures and causing symptoms.

Finally, if the goiter is large enough to be unsightly, the patient might want it treated for cosmetic reasons.

Treating Goiter That Affect Hormone Levels

If a goiter is secreting too much thyroid hormone, then there are three options for treatment: surgery, pills, and radioactive iodine.

Surgery: The best treatment for a goiter is a subtotal thyroidectomy. This is an operation in which most of the thyroid gland is removed.

Pills: There are some research studies suggesting that putting a patient on a

http://blog.cleveland.com/health/2009/01/ask_an_expert_can_goiters_be_t.html
thyroid hormone pill everyday may help to shrink goiters or keep them from growing. However, there are other studies suggesting that this may not work. There are also studies suggesting that even a mild overdose of thyroid hormone, if taken for many years, can result in osteoporosis and may put older individuals at risk for abnormal heart rhythms.

Tags: Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine, endocrinology, goiter, Graves' disease, MetroHealth Medical Center, NetWellness, Thomas Murphy, thyroid

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