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healthy living



Dr. Alexander Shifrin (right), endocrine surgeon at Jersey Shore University Medical Center in Neptune, checks patient Chris Gant of Toms River, who recently had his thyroid gland removed. DOUG HOOD/ASBURY PARK PRESS

THE REGULATOR

Thyroid problems impact functions of the entire body

By Susan Bloom

For the Asbury Park Press

Last spring, Chris Gant of Toms River began experiencing symptoms that seemed oddly contradictory.

"I was run down and weak; my muscles were achy and sore. I was losing weight like crazy, and I felt like I had the flu," the 42-year-old said of the conditions that made his job at the Toms River Municipal Utilities Authority difficult. "But at the same time, tests showed that my heart rate was high, in the 90 to 100 range."

Concerned when his muscles began twitching, he went to a local emergency room, where an endocrinologist's review of his blood work revealed that he tested positive for Graves' Disease, an autoimmune disorder that leads to overactivity of the thyroid gland, a condition also known as hyperthyroidism.

"They explained that I felt weak because my body was overtaxed from the secretion of too much thyroid hormone into my system," Gant shared. "When I put all the pieces together, I realized that two of my sisters had suffered from it, too."

Located in the neck, "the thyroid gland is responsible for metabolism and for regulating the function of all major organs, including the brain, heart and respiratory system, as well as our moods," said Dr. Alexander Shifrin, member of Meridian Cancer Care, and endocrine surgeon at Jersey Shore University Medical Center in Neptune.

"If the thyroid isn't working properly, there are two possible causes — abnormal functioning in the form of either hypothyroidism (low) or hyperthyroidism (high), or abnormal structure involving nodules on the thyroid."

According to Shifrin, nodules can be common and not problematic, and are often found incidentally while physicians are examining

THYROID TRUTHS

Experts estimate that as many as 15 million Americans suffer from thyroid conditions and that up to half of them are not even aware of it.

Statistics show that women are five to eight times more likely to suffer from a thyroid disorder than men, and that one in eight women will develop a thyroid disorder in their lifetime.

The Thyroid Foundation of America recommends that women receive annual thyroid hormone level tests starting at age 50 and that men take them starting at age 60.

for other conditions.

"For example," he said, "up to 50 percent of females have nodules on their thyroid by age 50, often identified through their annual gynecological or other exam. But nodules can also be more advanced, creating a protrusion in the neck called a goiter, which can create difficulty swallowing and potentially restrict breathing. About 10 percent of patients can also have cancer within these nodules."

Highs and lows

Often a function of the aging process, hypothyroidism represents low thyroid functioning and can manifest itself in the form of low energy, fatigue, hair loss and weight gain. The good news? "Hypothyroidism is easily treated with synthetic thyroid hormone that works exactly like the normal human hormone so there are no side effects," Shifrin said.

In the case of more-difficult-to-treat hyperthyroidism, which occurs when the thyroid gland produces too much hormone, "the thyroid may become very large and cause pressure on the throat or wind pipe, a condition which can cause anxiousness, heart palpitations, hot flashes, shakiness, muscle pain and weight loss."

According to Shifrin, treatment for this diagnosis requires suppression of the thyroid function

"via a pill or termination of the thyroid as a whole, either through the use of radioactive iodine treatments to decommission it or through its complete surgical removal, so that the patient can be reverted to the more-easily-treated condition of hypothyroidism and addressed appropriately."

Informed that radioactive iodine, taken in a pill form, could take up to a year to completely eliminate the thyroid functioning and could aggravate conditions of the eyes, Gant instead elected to have his thyroid surgically removed. "Surgery is a one-shot deal," Shifrin said of the minimally invasive, one-day procedure. "You leave the same day and have no more hyperthyroidism or Graves' disease either."

Gant noted the surgery was easy, with minimal pain. "My heart rate went back to normal and I literally felt better overnight," he said of the procedure he underwent last November. The surgery also identified the presence of cancer on his thyroid, "so I was doubly thankful to have my thyroid taken out," he said.

Now taking a pill every day to treat his hypothyroidism and dealing with a bit of excess weight gain, Gant said that these minor issues have been a small price to pay for his renewed lease on life.

"Before, my body was going all the time and I felt horrible. I'm so happy I had the procedure done and was even back to work within a few days, shoveling snow for the township," he laughed.

Shifrin shares in Gant's optimistic outlook for the future. "Chris takes one pill every morning and his prognosis is great — he'll be fine," he said. "The message is that if you have issues related to the thyroid, you should have them monitored by a specialized physician and treated appropriately. Thyroid conditions can be more difficult to treat if they get too advanced, but can be very manageable if addressed in their early stages."

The Endocrine Surgery Program at Jersey Shore University Medical Center: 732-775-4770; www.jerseyshoreuniversitymedicalcenter.com.



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Scan the code to see how a new study shows a drop in U.S. infant mortality rates.

People's Pharmacy

By Joe Graedon & Teresa Graedon

Cinnamon capsules counteract carbs

Q. I have been using cinnamon in capsules to help keep my blood sugar in normal range. I always take one or two before a high-carb meal. I use a costly one called Cinnulin, which is water-extracted. I am not diabetic, but get a reaction after certain foods that raise blood sugar quickly, like pizza, pie, pasta or potatoes.

Taking cinnamon has brought my fasting sugars down about 10 to 15 points, to the low- to mid-90s. This stuff really works.

A. A small clinical trial published last year demonstrated that cinnamon extract can significantly improve blood-sugar control in people with type 2 diabetes (Nutrition Research, June 2012). Those who would like more details about cinnamon and other ways to control blood sugar with herbs, foods and medications will find them in our new Guide to Managing Diabetes. Anyone who would like a copy, send \$3 in check or money order with a long (No. 10), stamped (66 cents), self-addressed envelope to: Graedons' People's Pharmacy, No. DM-11, P.O. Box 52027, Durham, NC 27717-2027. It also can be downloaded for \$2 from our website: www.peoplespharmacy.com.

Q. I am weaning myself off the antidepressant sertraline after having taken it for 10 years. I am going through hell!

I have constant pulses in my head that are driving me crazy. I am confused and irritable, laughing one minute and crying the next.

Tonight it is so bad I have been begging God to kill me if this does not stop. I need help.

A. Get in touch with your physician immediately to ask for help with antidepressant withdrawal. Gradual tapering of the dose over several weeks or months is critical.

Stopping a drug like sertraline (Zoloft) too quickly can cause terrible side effects such as dizziness, nausea, sweating and "brain zaps" that feel like electric shocks. Suicidal thoughts are not uncommon, but should disappear once you get through the withdrawal period.

Contact the Graedons at www.PeoplesPharmacy.com.

'Paint the Town Pink' event in Manasquan

Meridian Health will present "Little Things: An Evening with Giuliana and Bill Rancic" on May 4 at the Algonquin Arts Theatre in Manasquan. The event, presented by Meridian Cancer Care, is part of Paint the Town Pink, a month-long program to raise awareness of the importance of annual mammograms.

The Rancics will share how a mammogram was a life-saver for Giuliana, which is why they have become advocates for annual mammography and supporters of the mission of Paint the Town Pink.

Together, the couple has co-authored "I Do! Now What?" They also star on Style's "Giuliana & Bill" reality show. Donald Trump's original apprentice, Bill Rancic is an entrepreneur and international speaker. As anchor and managing editor of E! News, Giuliana Rancic reports on celebrity news and has hosted many red carpet events.

The evening will begin with a pre-event cocktail party, featuring a pink carpet, at 7 p.m. at Firefly, 152 Main St. in Manasquan. Tickets, which include VIP seating at the show, are \$125. Doors open at 8 p.m. Show time is scheduled for 8:30 p.m. The Algonquin Arts Theatre is at 173 Main St.

General admission tickets are \$50 and premium seating tickets are \$75. Tickets are available by calling 855-746-5411. For more information, visit www.PaintTheTownPink.com.

Submitted by Meridian Health.

HEALTHY DECISIONS

Professionals should determine your need for vitamin supplements



Joy Solliday-Allison

Did you ever take vitamins, thinking that they were doing something good for you and then find them half-used in the cabinet months later only to wonder why you were ever taking them in the first place?

Or have you started a vitamin regimen expecting to feel a new burst of energy or vigor and felt nothing? Or has the clerk in the store extolled all the virtues of various supplements but you still walk out feeling befuddled?

Perhaps you are a devoted One A Day or Centrum user. Flintstones? Gummies? There are endless choices out there, and that's one of the problems.

So, what's the answer? I will try to clear up some of the confusion about vitamins.

Let me say, first and foremost, that I am a firm believer in the power of food. The best choices are green and colorful food, in the form of fresh vegetables and fruits, and, of course, whole-sprouted grains. Fresh, natural foods should always be the first place we go to for proper nutrition. The more of these things we can pack into our diet the better. Our bodies are meant to process food and not pills, so I will always say food first! I am also a huge believer in properly balanced meals, for both good nutrition and for weight loss.

With that said, let me now explain that, for various reasons, we don't always get what we need from the foods we eat. This can be because we don't eat

the correct foods to get the proper balance of nutrients, or we may be eating fairly well but not digesting or absorbing properly (for a host of reasons beyond the scope of this article).

Health evaluations

The key here is to know what is going on, or not going on. First, we must determine if there is a need for supplementation, then supplement to that deficiency.

There are several ways to find out the truth about your own need for supplementation.

The first, simplest and most organic way is to listen to the signals from your own body. Unfortunately, we've become very reliant on over-the-counter pain medications and

other "remedies" to mask symptoms instead of allowing the body to "speak." If you have stubborn weight plateaus, are tired, getting frequent headaches, have dry skin, brittle nails, vision problems, moodiness or irritability, all these things can signal deficiencies.

These would be clues to go to the next step and get a professional nutritional analysis. A nutritional analysis can pinpoint where the deficiencies may be.

A second option is a urine analysis to check for absorption or digestion issues. The key idea here is that we need to know why we are taking supplements, what we are trying to accomplish or correct — and in what dosage — before we take them.

As the diet changes, so does

the nutrition, so if you are thinking of starting a weight-loss program and/or have changed your diet considerably, you need to revisit the need for vitamins.

Also, it is important to discuss any planned vitamin regimen with your physician, especially if you are on prescription medications.

Vitamin supplementation can be very helpful and useful, or it can be a big waste of time and money. So if you're supplementing, know why and for what deficiency first.

And remember — food first!

Joy Solliday-Allison is the owner/director of FOODFIT Ultimate Weight Management in Ocean Township. Call 855-693-6633 or visit www.myfoodfit.com.