



BY MELISSA AMORN, M.D.

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The rate of thyroid cancer in the United States has been steadily growing over the past two decades, and has more than doubled since 1990.

With 48,000 new cases in 2011, the prevalence of thyroid cancer continues to rise, and women are three times more likely than men to develop it.

Most people attribute the increase in thyroid cancer to improved imaging technology, which allows doctors to find tumors much earlier — when they are smaller and easier to treat. About 49 percent of nodules responsible for the increasing incidence of thyroid cancer measure 1 centimeter or smaller while 87 percent consists of tumors 2 centimeters or smaller.

About 90 percent of these tumors are known as “well-differentiated” thyroid cancer, which has a very high cure rate when detected early.

Regulating Metabolism

Endocrine glands release chemicals called hormones into our blood stream. The thyroid gland is one of the largest endocrine glands. Located at the base of our throat, it produces hormones by absorbing a chemical called iodine, which is often added to the table salt we use in our food.

By releasing its hormones into the blood, the thyroid regulates metabolic functions such as our weight, body temperature, blood pressure and heart rate.

Detection

Thyroid cancer often has no symptoms. Some patients may have difficulty swallowing, hoarseness or shortness of breath; however, most don't know they have the disease until they or their doctors detect a lump in their neck.

A history of thyroid cancer in your family or radiation exposure increases your risk of thyroid cancer. In addition, age is also an important risk factor, especially in people over 40.

To diagnose a lump or nodule, doctors use a diagnostic imaging test called an ultrasound, which emits high-frequency sound waves to create an image of the thyroid. Based on the findings, doctors will decide if they need to perform a needle biopsy of the nodule, which involves taking a small sample to test for cancer.

Treatment

The most common treatment is surgery to remove part or all of the thyroid gland and any lymph nodes that may have been affected by the cancer. Sometimes, doctors will also recommend that patients receive radioactive iodine, which uses radioactivity to eliminate any remaining cancer cells. External beam radiation is occasionally used in the more advanced cases of thyroid cancer, after other therapies have been exhausted.

Although thyroid cancer is not usually preventable, the majority of thyroid nodules are benign — only about 5 to 15 percent are cancerous. Because of improvements in early detection and treatment options, thyroid cancer has one of the highest survival and cure rates of all types of cancer.

Melissa Amorn, M.D., is a board-certified otolaryngologist (ENT) with the Sutter East Bay Medical Foundation and can be reached at (510) 204-1844.

