

YOUR GOOD HEALTH

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Women should be informed about these common medical issues

By Shannon Gilchrist

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Women disproportionately suffer from some health problems that the other half of the population rarely has to consider.

Here are a few conditions for females of all ages to watch:

Thyroid disorders

The thyroid, a gland at the front of the neck that produces hormones that regulate metabolism, affects lots of other body parts. It can be a miserable experience when something goes haywire.

When it doesn't release enough endocrine, a sufferer can experience fatigue, weight gain, dry skin, sluggish thinking, muscle weakness, constipation and depression.

When it releases too much of the hormone, it causes weight loss, diarrhea, trouble concentrating and a racing heart. The telltale signs are bulging eyes and swelling in the neck resulting from an enlarged thyroid gland.

Unfortunately for women, they are five to eight times more likely to have a malfunctioning thyroid than men, said Dr. Laura Ryan, an endocrinologist at the Center for Women's Health at Ohio State University.

"There's not a whole lot you can do to head it off," Ryan said. But it's relatively

easy to treat, she said, by replacing the hormones that the body would make naturally.

Osteoporosis

Once women reach menopause, at an average age of 51, estrogen drops off precipitously. Sometimes that leads to the loss of bone density, called osteoporosis.

It's a silent disorder, Ryan said. You might not know it until you fall and inexplicably break a bone.

The time for real prevention is decades earlier, in the preteen and teenage

years, when the skeleton is being set up. The calcium from dairy products and leafy green vegetables are vital then.

Acid-blocking medications such as Nexium and Prilosec for people with digestive issues have been implicated in increased risk of osteoporosis.

Resistance training and walking are good exercises to keep the bones strong. Not smoking makes a big difference. And osteoporosis medications, which got a bad rap in the past, actually can do wonders for stopping that bone loss and even reestablishing the bone structure, Ryan said.

Alzheimer's disease

About 5.2 million people in the United States and 44 million worldwide have Alzheimer's disease. Women make up two-thirds of those cases.

"I think for a long time, the reason was (thought to be) that women live longer," said Dr. Meredith Mucha,



an OhioHealth geriatrician. "Now, more research has shown that there's more to it than that."

There could be hormonal causes, such as the use of or lack of hormone replacement therapy. There's also a genetic tie to the APOE4 (Apolipoprotein E) gene, often called the Alzheimer's gene, but that isn't a guarantee.

Overall, only 1 in 4 people is diagnosed. "So many people just brush it off as old age and never get evaluated," she said.

But that's a problem because it ends up being the sixth-leading cause of death in the United States. People die from complications of no longer being able to function. They can't eat, bathe or even sit properly. They also get more infections.

Multiple sclerosis

Multiple sclerosis, in which the body's immune system turns on the nervous system, can be a scary diagnosis, but treatment has come a long way. A sufferer can live a nearly normal, active life, unlike 30 years ago or longer, when they might have been relegated to a bed or wheelchair.

About 70 percent to 80 percent of cases afflict women, said Dr. DeRen Huang, a Mount Carmel Health neurologist.

"We don't exactly know the reason," Huang said.

Evidence suggests that vitamin D, which the body manufactures from sun exposure, is vitally important, both to warding it off and mitigating damage after onset. Sometimes an over-the-counter supplement isn't enough to make up for that, Huang said, and patients need to get a prescription for heavy-duty vitamin D.



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