

23 – 29 MAY 2016: INTERNATIONAL THYROID AWARENESS WEEK

This week, Thyroid Support New Zealand, Thyroid Federation International and several other national thyroid organisations around the world ask your attention for thyroid health and disease.

The thyroid gland is a butterfly shaped gland in the lower front of the neck. It has important functions in the body: the hormones produced by the thyroid gland are essential for cellular differentiation, growth and metabolism.

Unfortunately, as with most body organs, a number of things can go wrong with the thyroid gland. There are several types of thyroid disease, such as hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid), hyperthyroidism (overactive thyroid), goitre (enlarged thyroid), thyroid nodules (lumps) and thyroid cancer. These conditions can cause a wide variety of - sometimes debilitating - symptoms.

Thyroid disease is reasonably common, in New Zealand and in the world. Worldwide, the number of people suffering from some form of thyroid condition is estimated at 200 million. According to the 2006/2007 New Zealand Health Survey (Ministry of Health), 113,200 people in New Zealand over the age of 15 years had a thyroid condition (as diagnosed by a doctor) in that period.

Thyroid disease affects women and men, adults and children, of all ethnicities and all social backgrounds. Thyroid disease does not discriminate. All people can get it, although some are more likely to get it than others. For example, thyroid conditions are more common in women than in men.

Adequate treatment of thyroid conditions can significantly improve your quality of life. If it is not, or not properly, treated, a thyroid condition may lead to increased cholesterol levels, heart disease, infertility and osteoporosis.

Early detection of thyroid cancer can save your life (as can the proper, life-long follow-up if you are diagnosed with thyroid cancer). A helpful tool for early detection, developed by the American College of Endocrinology, is the **neck-check** (http://www.thyroidsupportnz.co.nz/files/Neckcheck_print.pdf).

There are some signs to look out for:

- lumps in your neck (which are benign in most cases)
- lymph node swellings
- fullness in the neck
- voice changes, or
- difficulty breathing or swallowing.

We recommend doing the neck-check regularly. If you have any of the above signs, please visit your doctor.

Links to more information about the different types of thyroid disease, including their symptoms, can be found on our web page about thyroid conditions. If you suffer from one or more symptoms, again, please go to your doctor. Information about this year's Special Topic – Thyroid disease in children – is also available on our website.