

HYPER TO HYPO

By Susey Harmer



I was in my early twenties and in a competitive co-op business program at University of Toronto. It was all very new and overwhelming and I remember feeling consistently stressed with all the reading, studying and job interviews. I had IBS all the time. I was popping antacids regularly just to make it through the day.

I went to my doctor and he did some bloodwork. It turned out my TSH levels were low, meaning I was showing signs of hyperthyroidism. So, my doctor sent me to an endocrinologist in Toronto. I have a very vague memory of what happened next, but I compliantly followed instructions to do what I thought was a test to evaluate my thyroid activity. I was instructed to drink radioactive iodine which was then followed by an X-ray. Instead, as I found out decades later, the purpose of drinking the radioactive iodine was actually to kill the function of my thyroid. In retrospect, I wish I had better understood the procedure and had the time to understand the short and long term repercussions of it. As well, it would have been good to know if there were alternative treatments.

Now, being on the Thyroid Foundation of Canada (TFC) Board of Directors, I have learned a lot from my peers and through reading up on thyroid disorders and treatments on thyroid.ca.

The doctors thought my hyperthyroid condition originated from a virus and based on what I had read more recently, it looked like virally induced thyroid issues can generally resolve on their own without interference. Perhaps it was the only option, but I wish I was armed with more information before undergoing the radiation. That's actually why I wanted to join the TFC, as one of our core missions is to help those with thyroid disorders get the information they need to make informed decisions about their health, and ask the right questions to their doctors and endocrinologists.

Now, I have to take levothyroxine daily for hypothyroidism and still struggle with the associated symptoms. Fortunately, I have a fantastic family doctor who manages my condition by ensuring I have regular blood tests to check TSH levels. I am also extremely fortunate as my doctor is well educated on the fact that TSH levels have a broad range of what is considered 'normal' and what may be a good level for one person may be too high or low for another. It is about how you, personally, feel and then the dosage should be adapted based on your unique needs. For example, we have found the right balance for me has been achieved by taking 0.1 mg five days a week and 0.088 mg twice per week. When I was pregnant with my first child, the attending endocrinologist felt I should increase my dosage and ordered me to have 0.1 mg every day.

The result was that I suddenly started feeling panicked and anxious on a regular basis. In this situation, it was difficult to identify if I was feeling stressed because of daily life or because the dosage was too high. It was a delicate dance finding the right levels. Even now, most of the time, I feel symptoms of both hyper and hypo! The hypo symptoms I regularly struggle with are feeling cold easily, feeling tired and lethargic, and having brittle hair. The hyper symptoms I generally experience are feeling anxious and having a big appetite. So I feel like I'm straddling the two extremes in thyroid disorders: hyper and hypo! I guess I like to be different...

Ultimately, it is about finding a doctor or endocrinologist who can take a personalized approach. It's not just about the numbers, it is how you feel. Keeping regular tabs on your TSH levels is the first step, but the rest is finding the right balance that makes you feel your best. You'd be surprised how many people have thyroid disorders. Talking to others and hearing their personal journeys is comforting and can make you realize that you shouldn't settle for feeling mediocre... you need to fight to live your best life.

Encourage everyone you know to visit thyroid.ca. There is lots of great information, and by supporting the foundation, the TFC can continue to support patients, like us, across Canada.

Susey Harmer
TFC Director of Fundraising



Susey and Family