

Your Thyroid MASTER OF METABOLISM

How sticking out your neck can help sculpt your abs.

BY SARAH TUFF

There's no question that getting tight abs comes from plenty of time in the gym, performing the right moves and sticking to a clean diet. But active women can take a step closer toward losing fat, building muscle and sculpting fantastic abs by thinking about their thyroid, the butterfly-shaped gland found in the neck. "The thyroid

is the master gland of energy and metabolism," says Mary Shomon, author of *The Thyroid Diet: Manage Your Metabolism for Lasting Weight Loss*. Think of your thyroid as cruise control for your body, setting the speed at which you burn energy. So mastering your midsection often starts with your neck. Here's how:

Setting the Right Speed

Jennifer Haas, MS, a registered dietitian at Nova Medical Group, a primary-care practice in Ashburn, Virginia, explains, the thyroid takes iodine from food and converts it into the hormones that regulate the rate of chemical reactions, or metabolism, in nearly all the cells of the body. These thyroid hormones decide how much of each macromolecule (protein, fat and carbohydrates) should be stored as energy and in what form—fat, glycogen or burned up as immediate energy. In plain English, that means it's impacting

how many calories you burn and how quickly you get into those skinny jeans.

The hormones that the thyroid pumps into the bloodstream do more, too. "They set the tempo of the heart, prod muscles to grow, even determine how quickly electrical impulses speed along the nerves," says Haas. "And, because the brain is full of hormone receptors, thyroid hormones also affect mood and memory. When the thyroid is working perfectly, every organ in the body can function as it should." Every cell in the body depends upon thyroid hormones for regulation of their metabolism. And when everything's working in tip-top shape, that includes your abs too.

Keeping on the Cruise Control

You can take certain steps to support a healthy metabolic function by looking out for your thyroid, says Haas. "Eat small meals every two to three hours to keep the metabolism high," she says.

"Also, balance your complex carbs and lean proteins at each meal."

By ensuring adequate intake of iodine, selenium and magnesium (see sidebar), you can help keep the thyroid on track, adds Haas. "Roast, broil, grill or bake cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli and brussels sprouts to enable the body to use the iodine naturally found in them," she says. "And avoid excess fluoride consumption, which can compete with the other minerals that affect the body's production of thyroid hormones. Remember to rinse after brushing your teeth and drink filtered water when possible."

Shomon says that an anti-inflammatory diet—including such foods as olive oil and fish—can help calm some types of thyroid diseases. "That means avoiding allergens and toxins, eating organic, eating foods low on the glycemic index and focusing on good nutritional balance."

Finally, stress-reducing activities such as getting plenty of rest (at least seven hours) can also improve thyroid function, says Haas. So can gym time. Which means that by simply doing abdominal exercises or hitting your cardio, you're one step closer toward truly tight abs. But by taking into

account the role of your thyroid, you can really reach your fat-loss and muscle-building goals.

Impacting Women But when the thyroid isn't functioning perfectly, things can go haywire. According to the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists (AACE), 27 million Americans have a thyroid disorder—and more than half of them don't know about it. The AACE also reports that women make up more than 80 percent of patients with thyroid diseases and that women are five to eight times more likely than men to suffer from hypothyroidism, or an underactive thyroid. (Less common is hyperthyroidism, or an overactive thyroid.)

"Hypothyroidism can slow the metabolism and reduce the rate of caloric expenditure," says Shomon. "So someone may find that they gain weight despite no change in diet or exercise, or that they need to cut calories and/or increase exercise in order to maintain their weight or avoid gaining weight."

When your thyroid is underactive,

says Shomon, your basal metabolic rate—the rate at which you burn calories at rest—drops while the ability of your cells to use oxygen is also impaired. "This reduced oxygen utilization makes cells less effective at converting food into energy," says Shomon, "another factor that encourages fat storage."

Thyroid disorders also impact your abdominal muscles and diminish muscle mass, which can lead to fatigue and cause exercise intolerance, says Haas. They can even cause loss of muscle tone and strength. While hyperthyroidism can cause muscular weaknesses, hypothyroidism can cause muscular aches, pains and cramps, says Shomon. And when you're feeling the unpleasant effects of hypothyroidism (see sidebar), she adds, you're less likely to want to dash to the gym for a set of abs-blasting moves.

So to keep your midsection in optimal shape and maximize on your gains in the gym and at the dinner table, start by paying closer attention to your thyroid. With a healthy metabolism, you'll be cruising to your dream abs in no time. ☺



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