

HASHIMOTO'S THYROIDITIS IN CHILDREN

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Hashimoto's thyroiditis

The most common cause of hypothyroidism in children and adolescents is Hashimoto's thyroiditis, an autoimmune disease. Here, the body's own immune system attacks the thyroid gland and interferes with the production of thyroid hormones. The onset of this condition can occur at any age, and the diagnosis may be easily overlooked for years, as the symptoms of hypothyroidism develop very slowly. As the thyroid gland becomes increasingly underactive, physical and mental changes will become more obvious.

Often the first sign is that the child's growth rate decreases unexpectedly and skeletal development is delayed. The child may also have an obvious swelling of the neck (goitre), as the thyroid gland becomes inflamed. Other symptoms may emerge, such as unusual tiredness or lethargy, dry itchy skin, increased sensitivity to cold, weight gain or generalized swelling, poor concentration, decreased energy, and constipation.

If hypothyroidism is suspected, a simple blood test is taken, measuring the levels of thyroid hormone and thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH), in the blood. The presence of thyroid antibodies (anti-thyroperoxidase and anti-thyroglobulin) is also helpful in confirming the diagnosis.

Treatment

The treatment for Hashimoto's thyroiditis in children and adolescents is the same as in adults. Thyroid hormone replacement is taken daily for life. The dosage of thyroid hormone needs to be age-appropriate, as the body's demands for thyroid hormone vary with age. Regular thyroid function tests will need to be assessed by a doctor to ensure that normal hormone levels are maintained.

Side effects

For those children and adolescents being treated for hypothyroidism, the results are mainly positive. The majority of their symptoms will disappear, and the body's time for 'catch-up' growth will begin. An increase in bone development will also occur. However, in children who have had long-standing hypothyroidism, ultimate height potential may be partly lost. As the child regains normal thyroid function, behavioral problems may arise as their physical and mental processes speed up. An increase in energy and alertness may lead to a decreased attention span and a loss of concentration, especially in school. Teachers should be made aware of the child's condition, as well as treatment and possible changes in behavior. Over time, any problems with behavior, or at school, will resolve.