



## Cumbria Advisory Thyroid Service

### INFORMATION SHEET



### GRAVES' DISEASE

Around three-quarters of cases of hyperthyroidism are caused by Graves' Disease. Many people with Graves' Disease may have inherited a tendency to develop it, although other factors are also involved in triggering the condition. The people most likely to develop Graves' Disease are women between the ages of 40 and 50. However it is also common among the ages of 20 to 40 years and in rare case can strike as young as five. There are occasions where their babies of sufferers are affected. Drugs, surgery and radioactive iodine are all possible ways to treat the disease, but there is no one treatment that is right for everyone. Your specialist may want to discuss the treatment options with you before making the final decision on which approach is best for you. After treatment you will need regular check ups to ensure that you stay well.

Graves' Disease, like Hashimoto's Disease is an autoimmune condition, caused by the immune system reacting as if its own tissue were foreign. It tends to run in families and is linked to other autoimmune diseases. In fact, both often cluster in families, leading to doctor's research suspecting a common gene or group of genes is responsible.

Just what triggers the body to turn against itself in Graves' Disease is still frustratingly not completely known. As in Hashimoto's Disease it is also found the thyroid antibodies are produced – but where from is still a large question to be answered. As in many autoimmune diseases the question of stress being a factor is still being researched. A number of papers have been produced in times of stress, during war for example, and in particular during the Northern Ireland conflicts which have based their findings on the rising incidence of this disease during those periods.

Graves' Disease has been called the 'great masquerader' because it doesn't always produce the typical symptoms of an overactive thyroid. Instead of being agitated and overactive, some sufferers become lethargic and passive, unable to do anything other than lie in bed all day.

In its earliest stages, over-activity of the thyroid may not be easy to diagnose. Later when the picture is more florid, it becomes easier. Your doctor has to distinguish thyroid activity from anxiety. Laboratory tests will usually indicate a clear confirmation of the diagnosis. The total of free T3 levels and T4 levels are raised above normal, and the TSH (*thyroid stimulating hormone*) is depressed. In the early stages the T3 level may be raised but the TSH level will remain depressed. Coupled with clinical symptoms and close observation over time the diagnosis becomes clear. Another diagnostic aid in Graves' Disease is an isotope scan which will show an increased uptake in the radioisotope uniformly throughout both lobes of the thyroid. Furthermore, nearly all patients with Graves' Disease have thyroid stimulating antibodies (*thyrotrophin – receptor antibodies*) in their blood, but this test is not universally available.

## **What can be done?**

Curative treatment can be done by three main methods:

- **Antithyroid drugs** – plus other medications to alleviate the symptoms
- **Radio-iodine131** – which is concentrated in the thyroid cells and by irradiation destroys them
- **Surgery** – surgical removal of most of the thyroid gland (subtotal thyroidectomy)

**For further information on medication** 'Thyroid Disorders' by Dr Rowan Hillson, published by Vintage Press. 0091884349 Ch. 12.

**For further information on coping with Graves' Disease refer to** "Coping with Thyroid Problems" by Dr Joan Gomez (ISBN 0-85969-687-1) Ch.4.

## **REFERENCES:**

"*Thyroid Disease – The Facts*" R I S Bayliss & W M G Tunbridge (ISBN 0192629468)

"*Thyroid Problems*" Patsy Westcott (ISBN 07225-3164-8)

"*Understanding Thyroid Disorders*" Dr A Toft (ISBN 1903474191)

## **C.A.T.S RECOMMENDS YOU ALWAYS SEEK YOUR DOCTORS ADVICE**

### **Disclaimer**

*The purpose of this information leaflet is to help those suffering with thyroid disease. Whilst every effort is made to provide accurate information, it is impossible to ensure that the information given is relevant to every individual. No responsibility is accepted by CATS and it is recommended and essential, that if in any doubt about your condition, that you should always contact your doctor, specialist physician or surgeon to seek medical advice.*