

Thyroidectomy

What is the thyroid?

The thyroid gland produces thyroid hormone, which is important in regulating the body's metabolism or how it expends energy. It is located in the midline of the middle to lower third of the neck. Closely associated with the thyroid are the parathyroid glands. These are 4 small glands that control the body's calcium level.

When is surgery done?

- (1) Surgery is done to remove a cancer in the gland.
- (2) Sometimes the gland may become enlarged, or goiterous, and cause symptoms from pressure on nearby structures such as the airway or food tube, causing shortness of breath or difficulty swallowing.
- (3) Hyperfunctioning of the gland, as in Grave's disease, may also benefit from surgery.

What is done at surgery?

The thyroid gland is either totally or partially removed, depending on the disease present. The parathyroid glands are identified and saved.

What can I expect after surgery?

- (1) A scar will be present in the lower midline of the neck. This is usually easily concealable.
- (2) Some of the skin nerves may be cut, causing some numbness over the incision site. This may improve over time.
- (3) Initially, some swelling may be present and in time become firm and lumpy underneath the scar. This should improve with time and some massaging of the scar.
- (4) The voice may be somewhat raspy and hoarse. This typically gets better. If the recurrent laryngeal nerve which controls the voice box was injured, this could be permanent.
- (5) Rarely, if both nerves on either side of the gland were injured, it would be necessary to insert a breathing tube into the neck, called a tracheostomy.
- (6) Trouble swallowing is common after surgery and is a result of the dissection in the neck, as well as from the breathing tube. It gets better in 3 to 4 days.
- (7) Hypocalcemia, or low blood calcium, may occur in up to 1 out of 5 people. You may require supplementation with calcium or vitamin D or both. Again, this is usually transient, up to 3 to 4 weeks. Rarely, you may require lifelong calcium supplements. Tingling in the fingers or toes or around the lips is a sign of low calcium.
- (8) Please call your doctor if you experience high fever (greater than 102 degrees Fahrenheit), trouble breathing, severe muscle spasms, or increased neck swelling at home.

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