

The high-tech test that can help you cure dozens of your most nagging, unexplained health problems - By Jonathan V. Wright, M.D.

Why you need 83 times more of this essential, cancer-fighting nutrient than the “experts” say you do

By Jonathan V. Wright, M.D.

If you’re taking “thyroid” for hypothyroidism—whether it’s the whole natural variety or the single-hormone, synthetic type—you’ve probably improved your energy levels, become a bit more alert, lowered your cholesterol and risk of atherosclerosis in general, and improved the health of your skin and fingernails. But unless you’re getting enough iodine, you may also be raising your risk of breast cancer by taking that thyroid supplement.

I covered Dr. John Myers’ remarkably quick and effective iodine cure for fibrocystic breast disease in January. That article touched briefly on iodine’s ability to reduce breast cancer risk. But it’s an important enough benefit to warrant its own article.

In addition to reducing breast cancer risk, raising iodine intake to an optimal level might also help women lower their endometrial and ovarian cancer risk. In men, it can help lower prostate cancer risk. And both sexes may simultaneously reduce or even eliminate their need for thyroid supplements altogether by boosting iodine levels.

Even if you aren’t taking supplemental thyroid and you’re eating a healthful diet, taking a good multivitamin/mineral supplement, and all your major “health markers” (cholesterol levels, blood glucose/insulin levels, etc.) are within normal ranges, you should still reconsider your iodine intake. Making sure you’re getting the full amount your body really needs can only help all your other efforts to stay healthy and cancer-free. Unfortunately, there’s a good chance you’re not getting enough of this essential element.

The RDA barely scratches the surface

Dr. Guy Abraham, former professor of obstetrics, gynecology, and endocrinology at the UCLA School of Medicine, has conducted iodine research for years. Since 2002, he’s published a series of articles arguing that the RDA (Recommended Daily Allowance) for iodine is much too low. Although the Institute of Medicine has picked 150 micrograms per day for adults, and less for children, Dr. Abraham argues—convincingly—that 12.5 milligrams (that’s 12,500 micrograms) is the optimal daily amount of iodine, not only for your thyroid but for the rest of your body, too.

First, about that thyroid supplement-breast cancer link. In one study, breast cancer was found twice as often (12.1 percent) in women taking thyroid supplements for hypothyroidism, compared to women not taking thyroid supplements (6.2 percent). And the researchers also noted that thyroid-supplement-related breast cancer risk increases with time.

In another study, women undergoing thyroid treatment for more than 15 years had a 19.5 percent incidence of breast cancer, compared with a 10 percent incidence in women taking thyroid treatment for five years.

It's very likely this extra breast cancer risk would disappear...and possibly some of the need for thyroid supplements, too...if the women in these studies had been taking a "Japanese" amount of iodine every day. The Japanese have traditionally consumed more iodine, mostly from seaweed, than any other population. The average daily intake of iodine in Japan, 13.8 milligrams, is very close to Dr Abraham's optimal daily amount. Breast cancer incidence is lower in Japan than anywhere else in the world. In fact, except for stomach cancer, Japan has one of the lowest worldwide rates of every other type of cancer known, including prostate cancer. Japan also has one of the lowest incidences of iodine deficiency, goiter, and hypothyroidism. Several thousand years of safely consuming a diet containing a daily average of 13.8 milligrams of iodine with all its cancer-reducing and other benefits strongly suggests that Dr. Abraham's 12.5 milligrams daily is "optimal" and not an overdose.

And Japan isn't the only country whose statistics support the iodine-cancer link. Researchers have also pointed out that Iceland (another "high-iodine-intake" country) has low rates of both goiter (enlarged thyroid) and breast cancer, while the low-iodine-intake countries Mexico and Thailand have high incidences of both these problems.

Give your body enough to go around

Dr. Abraham arrived at his conclusion that we need 12.5 milligrams of iodine a day based not only on his own experience and observation but also with the help of an extensive research review. One study he points out was co-authored in 1954 by Roslyn Yalow (later a Nobel Prize winner). She and her co-worker found that the total amount of iodine in the adult human body ranges from 7 to 13 milligrams. The iodine "pool" is divided into two major compartments, the thyroid gland and the rest of the body.

Other researchers determined that the amount retained by the thyroid gland is 6-7 milligrams, which, according to Dr. Abraham, is the optimal amount to keep the thyroid gland itself operating at peak performance. Keep in mind, though, that's just for thyroid health.

Another prominent iodine researcher, Dr. Benjamin Eskin, determined that female breasts need about 5 milligrams of iodine per day. Add that to the amount your thyroid gland needs, and you come up with the 12.5 milligrams Dr. Abraham recommends.

Dr. Eskin also established that our thyroids "prefer" to concentrate the iodide form of iodine, while breasts concentrate iodine. Iodine and iodide are not always interchangeable: "Iodine" is the basic element, consisting of two "I" molecules bonded to each other (I-I); an excellent analogy is chlorine, which is two "Cl" molecules bonded to each other (Cl-Cl), while "chloride" is just one Cl molecule.

“Iodide” is one of those two iodine molecules, and is almost always found with another molecule, such as potassium (potassium iodide, or K-I). In experimental animals, the thyroid glands and the skin concentrated more iodide than iodine, while the stomach concentrated more iodine. Based on these and other findings, Dr. Abraham recommends that iodine supplementation should include both forms: iodine and iodide.

Flush potentially dangerous elements from your system

Iodine, chlorine, bromine, and fluorine are in the same “family” of elements. Although very tiny quantities of fluoride are likely useful for human health, the amounts poured into most American public water supplies are much too high and have been correlated with higher risk of a rare bone cancer as well as bone fracture in older women. Bromide also carries some risks at high quantities, including impaired thinking and memory, drowsiness, dizziness, and irritability. But iodine can actually help your body get rid of these potentially harmful elements, as well as others like lead, cadmium, arsenic, aluminum, and mercury.

Following observations by Dr. Abraham, my colleague David Brownstein, M.D., conducted a study to test iodine’s ability to help rid our bodies of fluoride and bromide. Eight individuals had “baseline” measurements taken of their urinary output of fluoride and bromide. Each research volunteer took one 50-milligram “loading dose” of iodine and then proceeded to take the 12.5 milligram optimal daily dose from that point on. Only one day after starting iodine, their urinary output of bromide and fluoride increased significantly and continued at this higher rate for all 30 days of the study.

All signs point to safety

Working with 10 female volunteers, Dr. Abraham conducted safety studies of the optimal 12.5 milligram iodine/iodide dose. He checked each woman’s blood pressure, weight, muscle mass, and body fat prior to starting iodine treatment, then again three months later. There were no statistically significant changes, although the body fat percentages did go down.

Dr. Abraham also took before-and-after measurements of several different markers of thyroid function, which included thyroid gland volume, TSH, total T4, free T4 (the active form of the thyroid hormone T4), and free T3. Although total T4 for the group declined significantly, both the “before” and “after” values were well within normal ranges, and there were no significant changes in free T4. The next part of Dr. Abraham’s safety study involved taking glucose, BUN, creatinine, sodium, potassium, chloride, calcium, total protein, albumin, globulin, bilirubin, alkaline phosphatase, and ALT and AST (liver-function measurements) before and after three months. Although all values were within normal ranges before and after, there were statistically significant improvements in creatinine, alkaline phosphatase, and AST, and a statistically significant decline in serum albumin.

Lastly, Dr. Abraham measured hemoglobin, hematocrit, and red and white blood cells before and after three months. None of them changed significantly.

Despite this apparent safety record, if you decide to adopt “optimal-dose” iodine/iodide supplementation, it’s best to work closely and carefully with your physician to monitor your thyroid function and general iodine safety. Dr. Abraham estimates that 14-15 milligrams of iodine/iodide daily is the upper limit for safe intake; that’s not much more than the optimal dose. Japanese researchers have found cases of hypothyroidism caused by excess iodine (20 milligrams daily).

It’s possible to be allergic to iodine, although it’s considerably less common than people usually think. (For more details about iodine safety, see the October 2002 issue of Nutrition & Healing.)

3 ways to get the iodine and iodide you need

In the 1820s, the French physician Jean Lugol combined iodine (5 percent) and potassium iodide (10 percent) along with 85 percent water. Since iodine kills germs, he used it for nearly any infectious disease, as well as many other problems, frequently with success. The combination quickly became known as “Lugol’s solution” and was adopted by practicing physicians throughout Europe and the Americas. Lugol’s solution was widely used until the 1920s. Many physicians recommended two drops daily for good health and more on occasion to help kill germs.

It’s not as commonly used any-more, but it is still available. And according to Dr. Abraham, two drops of Lugol’s solution contain 5 milligrams of iodine and 7.5 milli-grams of iodide—a total of 12.5 milligrams, exactly his recommended “optimal dose.” Lugol’s solution is available by prescription through nearly any pharmacy.

As a liquid, Lugol’s solution can be a bit inconvenient: It can stain clothing, and it also has a rather metallic taste unless well-diluted. It’s also easy to accidentally take too much.

But Dr. Abraham has formulated a tasteless, easy-to-swallow tablet formula called Iodoral, which contains those same 5 milligrams of iodine and 7.5 milligrams of iodide found in Lugol’s solution. Iodoral is available through compounding pharmacies, some natural food stores, and the Tahoma Clinic Dispensary. (Remember, one tablet daily, not two, contains the optimal dose.) Another formula called Triiodide (Scientific Botanicals, Seattle) also contains the exact same doses of iodine and iodide, combined with bladderwrack (a sea vegetable often used in natural medicine to treat thyroid problems). It’s also a liquid, but you don’t need a prescription for it as you do with Lugol’s solution: It’s available through natural food stores, compounding pharmacies, and the Tahoma Clinic Dispensary. Like Lugol’s solution, you need to take two drops of Triiodide to get the full 12.5 milligram dose.

Remember, with both Lugol’s and Triiodide, two drops daily is optimal—three drops taken every day for a prolonged period of time are definitely too much!

Dr. Abraham recommends a daily “loading dose” of 50 milligrams of iodine/iodide daily (which corresponds to eight drops of either Lugol’s solution or Triiodide or four tablets of Iodoral) for three months, then gradually reducing the amount to the “optimal” amount of 12.5 milligrams. Once again, please do this only when working with your doctor.

Although I’ve written about the numerous benefits of the SSKI version of iodide, it actually won’t help you get your daily optimal dose of both iodide and iodine, since it doesn’t contain any plain iodine. (The iodide in SSKI is combined with potassium.) JVV

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Intrigued by iodine?

All of Dr. Abraham’s articles are available from the Internet at www.optimox.com. They are a bit technical, though. An excellent non-technical explanation of iodine and health is available in the book *Iodine: Why You Need It, Why You Can’t Live Without It*, by David Brownstein, M.D. (available from Medical Alternatives Press, 1-888-647-5616). Another good, (mostly) non-technical book covering additional aspects of iodine and health is *Breast Cancer and Iodine*, by David Derry, M.D., Ph.D. (available from Trafford Publishing, 1-888-232-4444).

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Different form, even more benefits

These aren’t the only benefits the iodide form of iodine has to offer. Back in the November 2002 issue of *Nutrition & Healing*, the featured article covered dozens of other uses for an iodide-potassium combination called SSKI.

Although SSKI contributes only partially to the 12.5 milligram dose Dr. Abraham recommends, it has many benefits of its own: It can help unclog arteries, disinfect water, cure bladder infections, reduce or eliminate ovarian cysts, flatten unsightly keloids, loosen thick bronchial secretions, reduce or eliminate Peyronie’s disease and Dupuytren’s contracture, reduce or eliminate hemorrhoids, and help many, many other problems.