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When Natural Thyroid (Armour, Nature-throid, etc.) “Doesn’t Work”

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A person who lacks thyroid hormone is called “hypothyroid.” Until 1957, the only successful treatment for these people was dried animal thyroid gland (desiccated thyroid, USP), which contains lots of stored thyroid hormones. In ‘57, synthetic biologically-identical hormone (T4, levothyroxine) was introduced as Synthroid®. Through very shrewd marketing, T4 has largely supplanted USP “natural” thyroid but many still prefer the natural form.

Some doctors, including our staff, agree the time-tested USP thyroid is generally superior to T4. Critics suggest natural hormone is unreliable. That accusation is clearly false; USP was recently re-certified by the FDA and it is dependable. Even so, treatment with USP thyroid doesn’t always work as well as we’d like. Although it is perfectly “natural,” many people who take it still don’t feel 100% well – how can that be? Some of the answers may surprise you.

First, taking USP occasionally causes uncomfortable thyroid gland inflammation. The most common cause of hypothyroidism is autoimmune disease; the patient’s immune system attacks her own thyroid gland as though it were a threat and kills it. Being natural, USP contains some of the same proteins that “offend” the immune system.

Secondly, everyone agrees that taking the wrong dose of thyroid hormone – too little or too much – causes poor treatment results. Most doctors assume improper doses explain all failures of thyroid hormone treatment.

Experience shows a third issue more frequently creates problems: The most abundant thyroid hormone, T4 has to be activated by the cells of our body *and* some people can not do that efficiently. That’s right; T4 is a weak pre-hormone. Indeed, prescription T4 pills contain no active thyroid hormone (called T3), while USP provides some – about 20% of our daily requirement, when dosed appropriately. By that measure, USP is better than T4 but “better” does not mean “perfect.”

The great majority of the hormone delivered by USP is T4 – and it too must be activated. This conversion of T4 to T3 is not “automatic” but a regulated step. Regardless of its source, T4 will be processed according to our metabolic needs at the moment.

- When “times” are “good,” our cells transform T4 to T3 in order to increase the rate of our metabolism – which in simplest terms is the way our body produces and consumes energy.
- However, when the body is stressed (“bad times”), it changes T4 to reverse-T3 (RT3). Reverse-T3 has an anti-thyroid effect to slow down our energy consumption for maximum efficiency. Thus, RT3 helps us survive illness, injury, cold and starvation. Reverse-T3 is also increased – and here too seems protective – when our gland makes too much thyroid hormone (hyperthyroidism).

People who are stressed for any reason, physical, mental, emotional and even from lack of sleep, are unlikely to efficiently process T4. Sometimes even the T3 offered by natural thyroid treatment is simply not enough.

Fourthly, a common USP dosing strategy is in no way physiological. A healthy thyroid gland releases hormones throughout the day – but some doctors recommend USP once-daily (based on ill-interpreted results of archaic tests). How would you feel if you had to eat all your day’s food in one fast meal? Right! You’d be first too full, then too hungry. Worse, high hormone levels (“too full”) after the dose prompts our cells to make RT3, not T3!

Did your physician say you need thyroid hormone but USP treatment just doesn’t seem to help? Don’t stop taking it! Make this simple but important step: Divide your dose! Take half every twelve hours, starting as soon as you wake up. After two weeks, if you’re still not “right,” it is time to have some detailed blood tests done. Yes, lab tests now available are quite capable of revealing these problems – that’s how we know all this!

It is no surprise that patients feel best when taking a mixture of T4 and T3. Some need even more active T3 than the 20% provided in “natural” thyroid. In the next of this series, we’ll discuss how to find your best treatment.