

Congenital Hypothyroidism (CH)

General Overview

Q. What is CH?

A. Congenital hypothyroidism (CH) is a treatable disorder that occurs when the thyroid gland fails to develop or function properly. The result is not enough of the thyroid hormone called thyroxine (commonly referred to as T4). If left untreated, CH causes severe problems with growth and development.

Q. Is there only one form of CH?

A. No. Some babies have no thyroid gland, and others have an underdeveloped gland or one in an abnormal position (for example, under the tongue). Another, less common cause of CH results when the chemicals necessary to make thyroid hormone do not work properly.

Q. How does the thyroid gland normally function?

A. The thyroid gland takes up iodine from the food we eat and uses it to make thyroid hormone. Thyroid hormone is critical for normal body growth and brain development.

Q. What happens to the thyroid gland in a child with CH?

A. The thyroid gland does not produce enough thyroid hormone in a child with CH. Most forms of hypothyroidism require lifelong treatment.

Q. What are the effects of having CH if it is not treated?

A. Untreated CH can result in severe and permanent brain damage and developmental disability.

Q. What is the treatment for CH?

A. Congenital hypothyroidism is easily treated with daily supplements of thyroid hormone. To prevent problems, treatment must begin shortly after birth.

Q. Why would a child have CH?

A. Most cases of CH are not inherited. About ten percent of children with CH have a genetic form, resulting when a baby receives a double-dose of a non-working gene for thyroid function (one from each parent). For more information about this, contact your health care provider or a genetic counselor.

Q. How common is CH?

A. About one in every 3,500 babies in Washington State is born with CH.

For more information about CH, please see the Disorders section of our website: www.doh.wa.gov/nbs.

