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THYROID DISORDERS AND AUTOIMMUNITY: BRIEF

Fatimah Mohammed Al-Hay, Zahra Hassan AL-Nasser, Kholoud Hassan ALMarhoun
Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal Hospital - National Guard – Dammam – Saudi Arabia

Abstract:
Thyroid disorders, particularly autoimmune thyroid diseases (AITDs), are prevalent conditions characterized by the immune system's attack on thyroid tissues. The most common forms include Hashimoto's thyroiditis (HT) and Graves' disease (GD), both of which can lead to significant hormonal imbalances. Understanding the interplay between autoimmunity and thyroid function is crucial for effective diagnosis and treatment.
Keywords: Thyroid disorders, Type, Diagnosis, Management

Corresponding author:
Fatimah Mohammed Al-Hay,
Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal Hospital
- National Guard – Dammam – Saudi Arabia

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INTRODUCTION:

Thyroid disorders, particularly autoimmune thyroid diseases (ATD), represent a significant area of concern in the field of autoimmunity. ATD encompasses conditions such as Graves' disease and Hashimoto's thyroiditis, which are characterized by an immune response directed against the thyroid gland, leading to either hyperthyroidism or hypothyroidism, respectively. (1, 2) The underlying mechanism involves a loss of tolerance to self-tissues, primarily due to dysfunction in T lymphocytes, which results in the production of autoantibodies that target thyroid-specific antigens. (3, 4) These disorders are the most common organ-specific autoimmune conditions, affecting approximately 2% of the female population and 0.2% of the male population. (5) Graves' disease is marked by the presence of thyroid-stimulating immunoglobulins that stimulate excessive thyroid hormone production, resulting in hyperthyroidism. (1, 3, 6) Conversely, Hashimoto's thyroiditis is characterized by lymphocytic infiltration and the presence of antibodies against thyroid peroxidase and thyroglobulin that leads to an autoimmune attack on the thyroid, often resulting in hypothyroidism, fatigue, and weight gain. (2, 7)

The Role of Autoimmunity in Thyroid Disorders

The pathogenesis of these diseases involves a complex interplay of genetic predisposition, environmental factors, and immune system dysregulation, particularly involving T lymphocytes and cytokines. (3) The association between autoimmune thyroid diseases and other autoimmune disorders, such as rheumatoid arthritis (RA) and systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), is well-documented. Studies indicate that thyroid dysfunction is prevalent in patients with these conditions, with 20% of SLE patients exhibiting hypothyroidism and 10% of RA patients showing similar findings. The presence of thyroid peroxidase antibodies (TPOAb) and antithyroglobulin antibodies (ATGAb) found in 30% of cases which further underscores the autoimmune nature of thyroid disorders. (8) Moreover, the role of specific human leukocyte antigen (HLA) haplotypes, such as HLA-B8 and HLA-DR3, has been implicated in the overlapping of autoimmune disorders, suggesting a shared genetic susceptibility. (9, 10) This genetic component, combined with environmental triggers, may explain the co-occurrence of ATD with other autoimmune diseases, necessitating routine screening for thyroid autoimmunity in patients with conditions like RA and SLE. (9) Environmental factors, such as dietary iodine intake, also play a crucial role in the development of ATD. Excessive iodine can exacerbate autoimmune thyroiditis, particularly in genetically predisposed individuals, while iodine deficiency has been linked to a lower incidence of these disorders.(9, 11)

Diagnosis of Thyroid Disorders

Laboratory tests play a crucial role in diagnosing thyroid disorders, with several key assays providing insights into thyroid function. The cornerstone of thyroid function testing is the measurement of serum thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) concentration. This test is essential for assessing both hyperthyroidism and hypothyroidism, as a normal TSH level can rule out thyroid dysfunction with high certainty in untreated populations at risk. (12, 13) In addition to TSH, serum free thyroid hormones, specifically free thyroxine (FT4) and free triiodothyronine (FT3), are critical for accurately reflecting thyroid status. Unlike total thyroid hormone measurements, which can be influenced by transport proteins, serum FT4 and FT3 levels provide a more reliable assessment of thyroid function. FT3 measurement is particularly useful in diagnosing hyperthyroidism and in cases of drug overdose in patients treated with levothyroxine (L-T4). (12) For a comprehensive evaluation, the inclusion of autoantibody tests is vital, especially in cases of suspected autoimmune thyroid diseases. The assay of anti-thyroperoxidase (TPO) antibodies is considered the primary test for diagnosing these conditions, while anti-thyroglobulin (Tg) antibodies are used selectively for patients with negative anti-TPO results. Additionally, anti-TSH receptor antibodies are specifically utilized to diagnose Graves' disease and atrophic chronic thyroiditis. (14) The evolution of thyroid function tests since the 1960s has significantly enhanced the diagnostic capabilities of healthcare providers. The combination of TSH measurement and the AMA (anti-TPO) titer improves both diagnostic and prognostic accuracy, particularly in autoimmune thyroid disorders. (15) However, it is essential to note that an abnormal TSH concentration alone is insufficient for initiating treatment; clinical judgment must guide the interpretation of these tests in conjunction with free T4 estimates. (13)

Imaging plays a crucial role in the evaluation and management of thyroid disorders, providing both structural and functional insights into the gland's condition. Among the various imaging modalities, ultrasound imaging is particularly significant due to its high-resolution capabilities, which allow for detailed anatomical assessment of the thyroid gland. This technique is essential for detecting structural anomalies, such as nodules or goiters, and is recommended for all patients with suspected thyroid

abnormalities.(16) Ultrasonography, a specific form of ultrasound, enables visualization of the thyroid's structure and is integral in differentiating between benign and malignant nodules. (17) The American Thyroid Association emphasizes the importance of ultrasound in the diagnostic process, particularly for patients presenting with nodular goiter or incidental findings on other imaging modalities. (16) In addition to ultrasound, nuclear medicine scanning provides functional information about the thyroid gland. This imaging technique is vital for assessing the metabolic activity of thyroid nodules, helping to distinguish between hyperfunctioning and non-functioning lesions. (17) Scintigraphy, a specific type of nuclear medicine scan, serves as a gold standard for detecting palpable nodules and is often compared with MRI findings to evaluate the extent of thyroid disorders. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is another valuable tool in the assessment of thyroid conditions. It offers superior anatomical detail and can detect lesions that may not be visible on scintigraphic images. MRI is particularly useful for evaluating the extent of thyroid cancer and assessing surrounding structures without exposing patients to ionizing radiation. (18) However, the choice of imaging modality often depends on the specific clinical scenario, with ultrasound and nuclear medicine scans being the primary methods for initial evaluation.

Management of Thyroid Disorders

Thyroid disorders, particularly hyperthyroidism, are commonly treated through a variety of medications and surgical options. The three standard treatment modalities for hyperthyroidism caused by Graves' disease include thionamide antithyroid drug therapy, radioactive iodine (131I), and surgery. (19) Each of these approaches has its own mechanisms and implications for patient management. Thionamide antithyroid drugs, such as Methimazole and Propylthiouracil, are frequently used as primary treatments. Methimazole is preferred due to its lower incidence of side effects, cost-effectiveness, and ease of administration, often requiring only a single daily dose. Propylthiouracil, while also effective, is particularly noted for its safety profile during pregnancy, making it a suitable option for pregnant patients. (20) Both medications work by inhibiting thyroid hormone synthesis, thus reducing the levels of circulating thyroid hormones. (21) Radioactive iodine therapy (RAI) is another significant treatment option, which involves administering radioactive iodine to selectively destroy overactive thyroid cells. (22) This method has been in use since the mid-twentieth century and is effective in managing hyperthyroidism, although it does not address the underlying autoimmune process that stimulates thyroid hormone production. RAI is often considered when patients do not respond adequately to antithyroid drugs or when there are concerns about the long-term management of the disease. Surgical intervention, such as thyroidectomy, may be indicated in cases of severe hyperthyroidism or when there is a suspicion of thyroid cancer. (19) Surgery can provide a definitive solution by removing the overactive thyroid tissue, but it carries risks associated with any surgical procedure, including potential complications related to anesthesia and postoperative recovery.

CONCLUSION:

The complex link between thyroid disorders and autoimmunity necessitates thorough screening and management strategies for affected individuals. Gaining insight into the mechanisms behind these conditions can enhance treatment options and improve outcomes for patients. A comprehensive diagnostic approach, including appropriate laboratory testing and imaging techniques, is essential for effective management of thyroid dysfunction and related autoimmune diseases.

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