



KAISER PERMANENTE®

Cancer of the Thyroid

The thyroid is a gland located in the front and sides of the neck. It produces hormones that are key for normal growth and for controlling the normal rate of activity of almost every system in the body. Unfortunately, some people will develop a small lump within the thyroid, called a thyroid nodule. Nodules in the thyroid gland may be found in as many as five to ten percent of the general population and are three times more common in women than men. Though most thyroid nodules are harmless, between five to ten percent of all thyroid nodules turn out to be cancerous.

Although there is no known reason why a thyroid nodule will develop in the first place, we do know that people who have received radiation treatment to the face, neck, or chest have a greater risk for developing thyroid nodules later. In fact, one-third of thyroid nodules found in such people may be cancerous. For this reason, it's important that you tell your doctor or health care professional if you think you have received radiation to your face, neck, or chest in the past.

Thyroid nodules usually cause no symptoms, but may be discovered during a routine examination. The vast majority of people with nodules have normal thyroid hormone blood levels. Occasionally, however, a nodule may be associated with either low or high thyroid levels as determined by a blood test. More rarely, thyroid nodules may cause pain or hoarseness or enlarged lymph nodes in the neck. If you experience such symptoms, you should call your doctor or health care professional.

Once a thyroid nodule is identified, you will need to undergo a procedure called a "fine needle aspiration of the gland," also called a "needle biopsy of the thyroid." This brief, safe, and simple procedure is done in the medical office. A needle, which is about the same size as a needle used to draw blood, is inserted into the nodule and a small amount of cellular material is withdrawn for testing. The results are usually available within a week.

Cells from the thyroid are identified as either normal, indeterminate, or possibly being cancerous. If the cells are normal—and most are—there is no need to do anything further. However, your doctor or health care professional will want to check the nodule in future examinations to make sure it's not getting bigger. An indeterminate reading means that it's unclear whether the nodule is harmless or dangerous. In this case, the nodule can either be surgically removed or followed closely by your doctor or health care professional. In partnership, you and your health care professional will decide which of these options to take.

If cells are found that could possibly be cancerous, however, the nodule should be removed. If cancer is confirmed, in most cases the entire thyroid gland is removed. To ensure that all the thyroid cells are gone, surgery is often followed by additional therapy called "radioactive iodine

ablation." This is a very safe therapy that involves taking a pill that eliminates any remaining thyroid tissue after the thyroid surgery. The combination of surgery and radioactive iodine cures most thyroid cancers.

After removing the cancerous thyroid gland, thyroid hormone replacement therapy will be necessary for the rest of your life. This means that you will have to take one pill every day and you will also need to have an occasional blood test.



For additional health information you can trust:

- Log on to our members-only Web site at www.kaiserpermanente.org/california, then click the "Kaiser Permanente Members Only" button
- Visit your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center
- Check your Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone messages at 1-800-33 ASK ME (1-800-332-7563)

To get your free Handbook and Healthphone Directory, call 1-800-464-4000.

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent health problems or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor or other health care professional.

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REGIONAL HEALTH EDUCATION