

# Ask A Vet: Thyroid Gland Controls Metabolism

*Sunday, January 3, 2016*

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My middle-aged Labrador retriever seems to be more lazy than usual, is gaining weight (even though he's not eating a lot of food), and his fur seems dull and patchy in certain areas. Is this something we should be concerned with or is this just a normal older dog change?

Dear Reader,

First, definitely bring your concerns to your regular veterinarian. He or she is your pet's main advocate and is only there to help. For your current concern, the main thing to investigate is your dog's thyroid gland. The thyroid is a gland in the neck which produces thyroid hormone. Thyroid hormone helps to control your metabolism. Growing animals will have a naturally high thyroid level. Sick or debilitated animals can have a temporarily low thyroid level. True hypothyroidism (having a low level of thyroid hormone) is a condition very commonly seen in dogs. For some unknown reason, a dog's immune system can attack the thyroid gland and destroy most of it. Without a normally functioning thyroid gland, these dogs can have a variety of signs. Most commonly seen is weight gain without a corresponding increase in calorie intake. Frequently we will see lethargy, exercise intolerance, dry/flaky skin, thinning hair, and/or recurrent skin infections. For breeding dogs, low thyroid levels can be the cause of decreased libido and infertility.

Diagnosis of the problem involves a blood test. Once we get the results back, we typically start your dog on a moderate dose of the thyroid medication. After 30 days, we recheck the value to ensure that levels are appropriate. Once the thyroid levels have been increased to normal, regular monitoring is required. Some doctors require bloodwork every 6 months; others require it annually. That decision is up to your veterinarian for their standards of care and your pet's individual case.

Treatment of this condition involves taking a thyroid supplement. Usually this is accomplished with a pill taken twice daily. Commonly, people will ask if the thyroid medication can be called into their regular pharmacy, since that is where they get their own thyroid supplement. While this idea is good in principle, dogs require a much higher dose of thyroid hormone than a person. The dose dispensed by your veterinarian is typically 10-15 times a normal human dose. Due to this major conversion issue, most veterinarians will not call the prescription to your pharmacy.

I hope this answers your questions on hypothyroidism. Remember to bring all concerns to your veterinarian to work up the case appropriately.

-Dr. Jason Heitzman