

REALLIFE...

My thyroid condition helped me get my dream career

TV property expert Melissa Porter, 35, tells *healthy* how the condition that made her pile on weight changed her life for the better

WORDS Beverly Kemp
PHOTOGRAPH Stuart Wood

When I was 26 I began to gain weight for no apparent reason. I shot up from a size 12 to a big 14 and was nudging 12 stone. My skin became dry, my hair got thinner and I suffered terrible mood swings. Some days I'd feel so tired and sad. I also developed short-term memory problems and had some embarrassing moments where I forgot people's names. That worried me – I'd always had a photographic memory. I had no idea what was wrong. But I saw it as a sign that something needed changing in my life.

'One day I met a friend for lunch. She stared at me and said, "Your goitre [just below the Adam's apple] is enlarged. You need to see a doctor." I peered at my neck in the mirror and sure enough it looked much bigger than normal. Why hadn't I noticed?

'The next day I went straight to my GP. I listed my symptoms and he immediately

diagnosed hypothyroidism – an underactive thyroid gland – and my blood tests confirmed it. Four per cent of the population suffer from thyroid disorders; the ratio of affected women to men is about 10:1. The thyroid is an endocrine gland, which makes hormones. If it stops working properly it can cause fertility problems, eye and heart disorders and even cancer. Until my diagnosis I'd never heard of hypothyroidism. Nobody I knew had it and there was no history of it in my family.'

MAKING CHANGES

'No woman likes to put on weight, so part of me felt relieved there was an explanation. But it was a shock, and also scary to be told I'd need medication every day for the rest of my life, as hypothyroidism is treated by a synthetic hormone called thyroxine.

'My first thought was, "Let's find a solution". I found out as much about hypothyroidism as I could and resolved to do everything in



my power to achieve optimum health and fitness levels. I hired a personal trainer, who devised me a high-impact aerobic exercise plan of circuit training, sprinting and jogging three times a week. At the end of each session I'd be exhausted but I started losing weight and my energy levels increased.

I also booked an appointment with a nutritionist at The Hale Clinic. She advised me to reduce my sugar and carbohydrate intake and cut out wheat and dairy. She also recommended a particular diet to suit my blood group (O). I'm a great believer in taking expert advice so I gave it a go.

'What I have learnt is that I feel better if I eat the right things. Breakfast is usually porridge with banana and honey. Lunch today was a spinach and rocket salad with roasted vegetables. I love shopping for food at my local market and these days I choose fresh wholesome ingredients from farmers who care about their produce. I wouldn't dream of eating a microwave meal as they're so high in salt and sugar. My meat comes from my local butcher rather than a supermarket. I avoid pasta, rice and bread and use soya milk and spreads. I was told people with blood group O benefit from eating meat so I eat a few portions a week.

'I've never been a big drinker so reducing my alcohol level wasn't a problem. I enjoy the occasional glass of champagne or red wine but probably a maximum of two units a week. Within a month of seeing the nutritionist my hair and complexion looked so much brighter and I felt great. But I'm no saint and still cheat sometimes. Today I've eaten a chocolate bar and a packet of crisps!'

FAME AND FORTUNE

'Another big lifestyle change was my decision to leave my marketing job, where I felt stuck in a rut, and set up my own business as a consultant. I felt confident about doing this as I'd successfully made other changes due to hypothyroidism. It was liberating to feel in control of my own destiny.

'Six months after my diagnosis in 2002 I got my big break. Through contacts I was lucky enough to land a job in TV on the shopping channel. I then moved into property presenting and most recently have been fronting *Britain's Dream Homes* on BBC1.

'It's important for me to look my best, so I am careful to manage my condition and keep my weight in check. I go to the gym twice weekly. I take 125mcg of thyroxine every day and weigh a stable 10st 7lb.

'I find complementary therapies help ward off stress and I do Pilates as well as having

regular aromatherapy massages and acupuncture. I used to get so nervous before presenting live in front of a camera. A course of NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) helped me confront my fears and I realised that if I messed up it wouldn't be the end of the world. Since then I've felt so much more confident and no longer get into a flap before I'm due on air.

'My memory is still poor. Luckily I have the ability to remember a script in the short term so I present well to camera but ask me an hour later what I said and it'll have gone completely!

'For me the best way of coping with thyroid disease is to maintain a positive outlook. What's the point of sitting around moaning about putting on weight? A couple

of years ago I felt so fit and healthy that I convinced myself I didn't need medication. Within two months of stopping thyroxine I'd put on a stone and become very grouchy. It taught me a valuable lesson. Today, I'm proud to be a patron of the British Thyroid Association and work to raise awareness. I believe my diagnosis was a milestone that forced me to face new challenges and helped me achieve my dream career.'

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● For the British Thyroid Foundation call 01423 709707 or visit www.btf-thyroid.org.

● For Thyroid UK call 01255 820407 or visit www.thyroiduk.org.



Melissa and co-presenter Luis Gonzalez transform homes on their TV show

IS YOUR THYROID MAKING YOU LOSE WEIGHT?

Hyperthyroidism is the opposite of hypothyroidism and is caused by an overactive thyroid gland. Symptoms include unexplained weight loss, palpitations, sweating, brittle nails and difficulty sleeping. Two per cent of women will develop it at some point during their lives, most commonly between the ages of 20 and 40, although children and the elderly are not immune. If untreated, an overactive thyroid gland can cause heart problems, complications during pregnancy and increased risk of miscarriage. Treatment can take the form of anti-thyroid drugs or radioactive iodine therapy to reduce hormone production.

Natural ways to help hypothyroidism

- **TRY VITAMIN A** According to a German study, people with hypothyroidism have impaired ability to convert betacarotene to vitamin A, so taking a supplement could help.
- **PACE YOURSELF** 'Lack of energy is central to thyroid problems so be realistic and listen to your body,' says Lyn Mynott of Thyroid UK. 'Plan your time so that you have breaks between activities and don't overload your day.'
- **TAKE ZINC** A study reported in the journal *Nutrition & Metabolism* revealed that thyroid hormone levels tended to be lower in those with lower blood levels of zinc, and that supplementing with zinc helped increase hormone levels.
- **GET REGULAR EXERCISE** 'Even if you just wriggle your toes and shrug your shoulders, exercise stimulates energy, boosts muscle weakness and improves anxiety and depression,' says Mynott.