

THYROID ULTRASOUND

A procedure at risk of being overused, as indicated by the Italian Association of Medical Endocrinologists

We like to think that an extra check-up may be beneficial but are instead exposing ourselves to unnecessary risk. This is the case with thyroid ultrasounds used for screening, or examination of a wide population, when no specific symptoms present themselves. There is a real possibility of finding benign nodules – or ones that wouldn't cause any trouble – and assuming that they might be malignant and dangerous. Sometimes this even results in unnecessary surgery.

LET'S UNDERSTAND WHY

In the course of the last few decades, improvements in technology have allowed ultrasound examinations to take on a more central and important role. However, the dependability of this technology must be considered together with two other factors: the extreme frequency of benign nodules in the thyroid, and the slow progression of malignant tumours, presenting less than a 5% risk of mortality.

Today, it is estimated that as many as 70% of post-menopausal women have a thyroid nodule that can be detected by an ultrasound. That said, for the vast majority, the nodule will never cause any problem or put the woman's health in danger.

Therefore, searching for them is useless.

But what is the risk of diagnosing something as dangerous when it actually isn't? The answer is called "overtreatment" – that is, the unnecessary use of medications or surgery, and their associated costs and complications, along with fear, worry, and days of missed work. It is also important to remember that there might be unspoken, purely economic interests involved. Individuals or companies can profit from the business of "thyroid disorders", prescribing medications or

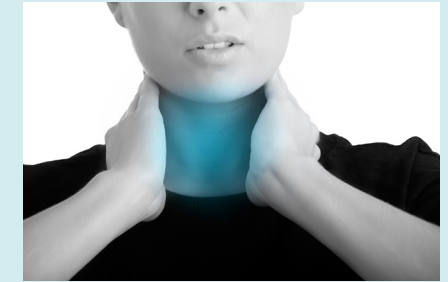


charging for basically useless exams. This is another reason why it is important to strongly discourage meaningless screenings that flood the health system, enormously increasing the costs and – even more seriously – the risks for the patient. These issues have been reported for years by experts and scientific societies concerned with thyroid disorders. Significant funds could be saved if ultrasounds were used more conservatively, making it possible to finance studies in order to better treat cases of aggressive thyroid cancer. These cases, though rare, do not yet have a medical solution.

A case in point is Korea, a country where the first screening campaign for malignant diseases, like thyroid cancer, was launched. The result was a true "epidemic" of malignant diseases, characterized by a staggering increase of surgeries, medical treatment and complications, yet with no simultaneous increase in mortality, as one would expect based on the increase of diagnoses. In other words, the use of the ultrasound made it possible to identify an increasing number of thyroid tumours that, with high likelihood, would have never manifested themselves as a health problem.

To learn more: "A schiena dritta", Test Salute 106, October 2013 (in Italian), available on www.altroconsumo.it in "magazine archive". Project "Doing more does not mean doing better – Choosing Wisely Italy"
www.slowmedicine.it
www.choosingwiselyitaly.org

THYROID: ADVICE FROM ALTROCONSUMO



- If you have noticed the appearance of a swelling on the neck, or if you have a frequent cough, hoarseness and difficulty swallowing, immediately seek the advice of a physician.
- Keep in mind that the place where you live and your dietary habits influence how your thyroid functions: talk about it with your doctor.
- When you go to the doctor, bring a list of medications that you are taking: some medications taken for heart problems (amiodarone and propranolol), psychiatric problems (lithium, phenytoin), anti-viral therapy (interferon), oestrogen, and some antibiotics (rifampicin) can have a direct effect on the proper functioning of the thyroid or may interfere with the strength of thyroid hormones.
- Tell your doctor about any heart or blood pressure problems: some of these conditions can be associated with thyroid dysfunction.
- When the thyroid ultrasound shows a benign nodule, the specialist suggests that you keep an eye on it: Get a clear explanation of what this means and how often the situation needs to be checked.