What is the thyroid?
The thyroid is a small gland located in the front of the neck, and is responsible for producing thyroid hormones. The thyroid hormones influence many functions in the body, including metabolism, brain development, breathing, heart and nervous system functions, body temperature, muscle strength, skin dryness, menstrual cycles, weight, and cholesterol levels.

What is hypothyroidism?
Hypothyroidism is a disorder that occurs when the thyroid gland does not make enough thyroid hormone to meet the body’s needs. Without enough thyroid hormone, many of the body’s functions slow down. Hypothyroidism can be caused by an under active thyroid gland, inflammation or damage to the thyroid gland (e.g. Hashimoto’s disease), certain medications, or because your thyroid gland was removed for medical reasons (e.g. thyroid cancer).

How does pregnancy affect thyroid function?
Thyroid hormones are vital to the development of a baby’s brain and nervous system. During the first trimester of pregnancy, a foetus relies entirely on the mother’s supply of thyroid hormones as their own thyroid gland is still developing. This results in a 50% increase in the mother’s thyroid production above her normal output. Pregnancy related hormones, including oestrogen, cause an increase in the levels of thyroid hormones in response to the increased demand. If the thyroid production is unable to meet this increased demand, there can be an increased risk of miscarriage, premature labour and foetal loss.

What causes hypothyroidism in pregnancy?
The most common cause of hypothyroidism in pregnant women is an autoimmune disorder known as Hashimoto’s disease, which damages the thyroid gland. Many women with this condition do not show symptoms prior to conceiving, but the increased demand for thyroid hormone puts them at risk of hypothyroidism once pregnant. Hypothyroidism can also occur during pregnancy due to iodine deficiency, existing hypothyroidism treated inadequately, or over-treatment of a hyperthyroid woman with thyroid medications.

What are the risks of hypothyroidism to the mother and baby?
As thyroid hormones are crucial to foetal development, particularly during the first trimester, hypothyroidism can impact a baby’s growth and brain development. Uncontrolled hypothyroidism during pregnancy can also lead to:
- Preeclampsia
- Anaemia
- Miscarriage
- Low birth weight
- Stillbirth
- Congestive heart failure

How is hypothyroidism in pregnancy diagnosed?
Hypothyroidism is diagnosed through measurement of thyroid hormone levels in the blood and a review of a patient’s symptoms. These symptoms may include fatigue, cold intolerance, muscle cramps, constipation and problems with memory or concentration. Changes in hormone levels during pregnancy can sometimes make thyroid function tests more difficult to interpret.

If you would like any further information regarding the risks of hypothyroidism during pregnancy, or want to know if you should be tested for this condition, please speak with your doctor or pharmacist.

How is hypothyroidism during pregnancy treated?
Hypothyroidism during pregnancy is treated by replacing the hormones which the body is no longer able to produce. The body’s natural thyroid hormones are supplemented with a synthetic thyroid hormone called thyroxine. For women already taking thyroid hormone medication, it is likely the dose will need to be increased during pregnancy due to the increase in the body’s thyroid requirements.

It is also recommended that pregnant women maintain a balanced diet and take a prenatal multivitamin containing iodine to ensure they are receiving the necessary nutrients for thyroid health.

Where can I get further information?
If you have any questions about the material contained in this leaflet, or would like any further information regarding hypothyroidism in pregnancy, please speak with your doctor or pharmacist.

References:

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