Iodine deficiency in the UK: cutting back on milk may be partially to blame

Excerpted from an article by Sandra Walsh, published on November 17, 2014 in the Daily Mail (UK).

Gill Bembridge wasn’t worried when she saw a swelling on the neck of her nine-year-old daughter Faye. She just thought Faye had swollen glands and was getting a cold. But a few days later a friend voiced concerns. “He’s a retired GP called Pete Lansley, and he told me the swelling was a sign of iodine deficiency,” says Gill, 31.

Studies show that up to two in three British girls and women may have low iodine levels. Since spotting Faye’s goiter, Dr Lansley has noticed an increasing number of people in the street with goiters near his home in Yorkshire. He says: “When I was doing my medical training in the late Sixties, I was at a hospital in Ankara in Turkey, and there were lots of people suffering from goiters. But you don’t expect to see many in the UK.”

Recent research also points to problems with iodine intake. Expectant mums need more iodine than most people, as it’s vital for fetal brain development. One study in The Lancet last year reported that children of women who were iodine deficient during pregnancy had lower IQs by the age of eight and poor reading ability by age nine compared with those born to the mothers with adequate iodine. Another study, in The Lancet in 2011, involved more than 700 teenage girls from across the UK and revealed 70% of them had iodine deficiency.

As a result, the ICCIDD Global Network placed the UK on the list of mildly deficient nations. The Department of Health has now added iodine to its National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS), which checks the nutrient intake of adults and children in the UK. It will look at the results next year and decide whether steps need to be taken to increase the nation’s iodine intake.

So why are our levels so low? In the UK, cows’ milk and other dairy products are our main source of iodine. This is due to a lucky accident: iodine is used as a disinfectant to clean cows’ udders and added to their feed, so it has entered our food chain. But consumption slumped when free school milk ended in the Seventies. And it has fallen further in recent years due to allergy fears and our changing tastes. Organic milk, which has grown in popularity, has around 40% less iodine due to the different farming processes.

The UK Iodine Group, led by Dr. Vanderpump, a consultant endocrinologist at the Royal Free Hampstead NHS Trust, is pressing the Government for a solution to Britain’s deficiency. In many countries, including Canada, the U.S., Denmark, and Switzerland, salt manufacturers add iodine to their products. This is thought to be the simplest and most effective way of improving population-wide intake. But there are no plans to iodize salt here.

“As soon as you even mention salt in Britain, people start talking about high blood pressure and strokes,” says Dr. Vanderpump.

Yet when Gill took Faye to her GP to ask for an iodine supplement she was brushed off. “We were told that at Faye’s age there are so many hormonal changes going on, the lump would probably go,” says Gill, who lives in Lincolnshire. “But Pete suggested a couple of iodine drops from the chemist mixed in with squash once a week.” Within a month the swelling had gone and Faye stopped taking the drops. “I count us very lucky that we have Pete as a friend. If it wasn’t for him Faye’s iodine status would have gone unnoticed.”