

"Rowing healed my thyroid!"

Struggling with blue moods and fatigue from a thyroid imbalance, Erica Haines, 40, found the fun workout that changed everything

Erica Haines groaned and pinched her eyes shut tighter as her tinny alarm blared in her ear. She tentatively reached out to turn it off and took a few deep breaths before slowly sitting up. "I would wake up every morning and feel like I got hit by a truck," recalls Erica. "I felt like I had the flu every single day. It was so frustrating.

Sick and tired

"I'd always been healthy and fit, but about 2½ years ago, I started to experience strange symptoms. I began gaining weight even though I was going for runs daily. I suffered from severe joint pain. My skin became super dry and my hair was falling out in large clumps in the shower. I'd never had problems with anxiety before, but I began having panic attacks regularly. The time I spent asleep never felt like enough, and there were days I was crawling into bed at 3:00 in the afternoon when I should have been getting my kids to sports practices or picking them up from school. I knew something wasn't right, but I wasn't sure what to do about it.

"One morning, I woke up and part of my neck felt sore and stiff. A good friend of mine had thyroid cancer, and her voice was in my head, telling me to do the thyroid check I'd learned. So I felt around with my fingers, and sure enough, I found a big palpable lump right over the gland. I called my doctor right away, and she agreed to run a blood test to check my thyroid levels. But when the results came back showing that I was in the normal range, she sent me home without listening to any of my other symptoms.

"Frustrated and still suffering, I began researching functional medicine doctors. I found one who listened to everything I was going through and ran more tests. She found seven benign nodes on my gland and diagnosed me with *Hashimoto's thyroiditis*, the most common cause of an underactive thyroid in America. But before starting me on medication, she wanted to try fixing my problem with lifestyle tweaks. She advised

that I stop running to help with my joint pain and ease stress on my body. I did what she suggested, but it was a difficult adjustment. Running had always been my stress reliever. Without it, I felt on edge. Even as my energy levels increased, I still felt adrift without regular runs to release my anxiety.

Relief at last

"For my sanity and happiness, I knew I needed to find something to replace running, but it had to be a low impact workout because my joints were weak and sore. One day, I was discussing it with my husband, and he suggested that I try rowing. As a cyclist, he liked that he could just get on the bike and pedal, and he thought I might enjoy something similar.

"At first, I pushed back. We didn't live near water, I'd never rowed a boat anywhere and I had no clue what rowing for exercise was like. Plus, we had a treadmill once that took up so much space and was so loud that I didn't want to bring another exercise machine into the house. But my husband was persistent, showing me videos of water rowers, which are quieter and offer more natural resistance than

the rowing machines they typically have at the gym. When I realized how narrow it was and that we could get it in a wood finish to match our décor, I finally agreed. I hadn't tried it before, but my husband was so confident I would like it, I figured I would just dive in.

"When the rower arrived, I found the Regatta Fitness app, which taught me proper form and had beginner workouts available. I gave it a try and instantly fell in love! I had no idea rowing would be a full body workout, and I loved that I could easily adjust the intensity depending on how I was feeling just by pulling harder or lighter. Best of all, it made me feel normal again—something I hadn't felt in a long time.

"I began rowing daily for 30 to 45 minutes, doing instructor-led classes through the Regatta app, and the more I rowed, the better I felt. As the muscles around my knees, hips and elbows got stronger, my joint pain decreased and eventually disappeared. I started sleeping deeper, so I felt refreshed and energized when I woke up, and I lost 15 pounds,

"Rowing has made me feel normal again—something I hadn't felt in a long time," cheers Erica



dropping two jeans sizes. My panic attacks vanished, and I finally had an outlet for stress on days when my family drove me a little crazy.

"At my most recent appointment to check the size of the nodes on my thyroid, my doctor was pleased to see that they have actually shrunk significantly, meaning I won't need to go onto thyroid medication after all. I finally feel like myself again—when my alarm goes off, I jump out of bed feeling refreshed, ready and excited to take on the day. Rowing will be part of my life for many years to come!"

—As told to Alyssa Sybertz

How rowing helps restore healthy thyroid function

"There's no reason to avoid exercise with an underactive thyroid," says Norma Lopez, M.D., an endocrinologist and thyroid specialist at Loyola Medicine in Maywood, Illinois. "In fact, exercise will help your thyroid recover." When thyroid hormone production slows (as it does in people with Hashimoto's), it causes low energy, weight gain and swelling in the joints—for this reason, many doctors

recommend staying away from exercise. "Underactive thyroid can decrease physical ability to exercise, but exercise itself does not overtax the thyroid," explains Dr. Lopez. The key: keeping it low-intensity. "If the exercise is gentle and sustainable, it will improve your well-being." Indeed, one study found that daily moderate-intensity exercise significantly raised levels of active thyroid hormone in the body, plus lowered

levels of hormones that dampen the thyroid in patients with hypothyroidism. To get the benefits, follow Erica Haines' lead and row for 30 minutes four days a week. "Start slow and increase your intensity as you can tolerate more," suggests Dr. Lopez. Look for rowing machines at your gym, try a class at an indoor rowing gym or look into an at-home rower. You can even rent a rower at WaterRower.com/rent.

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