

Disability Campaign.org

Autoimmune Diseases Information



According to the American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association, approximately 50 million Americans suffer from autoimmune disease; that means 1 in 5 Americans have an autoimmune disorder. What's more, researchers have identified 80-100 different autoimmune diseases and they suspect that at least 40 additional diseases have some autoimmune properties. Some autoimmune diseases are chronic and can be life threatening, while others are more easily treatable. If you or someone you know has been diagnosed with an autoimmune disease, or if you suspect that you may have an autoimmune disease, below is some general information that may be of use to you. Remember, always consult your health care practitioner(s) if you have any questions or require additional, more specific information regarding your health.

What is autoimmunity and what causes it?

Autoimmunity is, in very simplistic terms, when your immune cells attack your body's own cells rather than attacking foreign cells. In other words, your own immune system is attacking your own tissue.

The immune system normally can distinguish your own cells from foreign cells. With autoimmunity, an interruption causes your body not to distinguish a foreign cell from your own cells. There are many theories and research is still being done to determine what triggers autoimmunity; furthermore, while some autoimmune diseases have clear causes, others do not.

What are the types of autoimmunity?

1. **Organ-specific disorders** result when your immune system attacks mostly one organ. For example, in the case of Type 1 Diabetes, your immune system is attacking your pancreas.
2. **Non-organ-specific disorders** are widespread disorders that can affect your whole body and/or multiple organs. These include rheumatoid arthritis and lupus, amongst other autoimmune disorders.

How is autoimmunity diagnosed?



Most often, the diagnosis of an autoimmune disease requires you to visit multiple health care practitioners, including your general health physician and one or more specialists. Your physician will perform a physical exam; however, the exam by itself will not provide a full diagnosis. Because your immune system produces antibodies against harmful invaders in your body (such as bacteria, viruses, or fungi), diagnosing an autoimmune disease often involves identifying the antibodies your body is producing. This is done through thorough blood exams, in which your health practitioner will request specific tests to be sent to the lab. Based on the results, your symptoms, the physical exam, other diagnostic exams (e.g. x-rays, MRIs, etc.), and your family history, your practitioner may or may not be able to provide you with a complete diagnosis.

Challenges in Diagnosis

- Symptoms cross many medical specialties and can affect many/all body organs.
- General medical education provides minimal learning about autoimmune diseases.
- Some specialists are unaware of the interrelationships among the different autoimmune diseases.
- Initial symptoms are often intermittent, unspecific, or subtle until the disease becomes acute.
- Research in autoimmune diseases is limited in scope.

Treatment Options

- **Medications.** Your doctor will determine what medications, if any, can help you. Some medications relieve symptoms, others replace vital substances your body can no longer make on its own, and others suppress your overly active immune system.
- **In-office treatments.** Physical therapists can help improve your body movement. A speech therapist may help you if your autoimmune disorder affects your ability to speak clearly. Psychologist, psychiatrist, and counselors can also help you as you cope with living with an autoimmune disease.
- **Alternative Treatments.** Some patients have reported relief of symptoms from treatments such as acupuncture, natural supplements, meditation, etc.

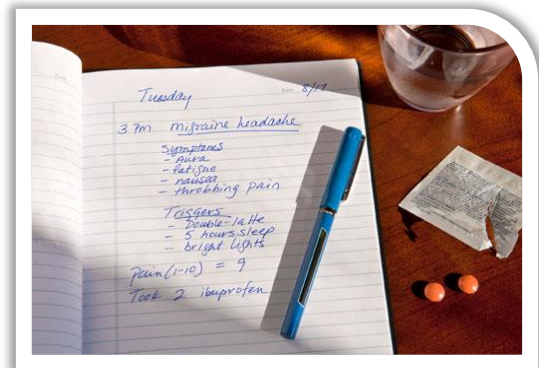


- **Lifestyle Changes.** More doctors and researchers agree that when you eat healthy, sleep well, reduce stress, and get regular physical activity you feel better. Just remember to check with your health care provider before making any lifestyle changes that may affect your health.



Tips on How to Live with an Autoimmune Disease

1. **Contact the organization that serves people with your autoimmune disease.** There are many associations specific to autoimmune diseases, such as the Sjögren's Syndrome Foundation, as well as more generic autoimmune disease associations, such as the American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association. They will be able to provide you with available resources and further information related to your disease.
2. **Find a local support group.** Let's face it: it's not easy to live with a disorder that is misunderstood by the medical field and your own family and friends. Consider joining a local support group, such as Chron's disease support group.
3. **Keep track of your symptoms.** In order to know what is triggering your symptoms and what is making them less bothersome, keep a "symptom journal" and chart the day/time, how you are feeling, your activities for that day, and your meals.



Links to Websites for additional Autoimmune Disease Resources/Support

- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease
<http://www.niaid.nih.gov/TOPICS/AUTOIMMUNE/Pages/default.aspx>
- National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases
<http://www.niams.nih.gov/>
- NIH Clinical Center
<http://clinicalcenter.nih.gov/>
- Office of Rare Diseases, NIH
<http://rarediseases.info.nih.gov/>

- American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association
<http://www.aarda.org/>
- Autoimmune Disease Resources
<http://www.evenbetterhealth.com/autoimmune-disease-resources.php>
- UAB School of Medicine
<http://www.uab.edu/medicine/camac/patient-care/patient-resources/types-of-arthritis-autoimmune-diseases>
- Direct Labs Autoimmune Disorders
<https://www.directlabs.com/Resources/AutoimmuneDisorders/tabid/7616/language/en-US/Default.aspx>
- Autoimmune Diseases Support Group
<http://www.inspire.com/groups/autoimmune-diseases/>

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P.O. Box 3333, Agoura Hills, CA 91376

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