

Living with Autoimmune Diseases

Our bodies have an immune system that protects us from disease and infection. But if you have an autoimmune disease, your immune system attacks itself by mistake, and you can get sick. Autoimmune diseases can affect connective tissue in your body. (Connective tissue binds together body tissues and organs.) Autoimmune disease can affect many parts of your body, such as your kidneys, nerves, muscles, endocrine system, and digestive system. (Your endocrine system directs your body's hormones and other chemicals.)



Most autoimmune diseases occur in women, and most often during their childbearing years. Some of these diseases occur more in African American, American Indian, and Latina women than in White women. Some common autoimmune diseases are Hashimoto's thyroiditis, Graves' disease, lupus, multiple sclerosis, and rheumatoid arthritis.

These diseases tend to run in families. Your genes, along with the way your immune system responds to certain triggers or things in the environment, affect your chances of getting one of these diseases. If you think you may have an autoimmune disease, ask your family members if they have had symptoms like yours. Although we don't have a cure for autoimmune diseases, you can treat your symptoms and feel better.

Common Autoimmune Diseases

More than 80 types of autoimmune diseases have been recognized. If you learn the symptoms of some of the more common ones, you can help yourself recognize the signs. But some autoimmune diseases share similar symptoms. These similarities make

diagnosing this group of diseases difficult, even for doctors. The delay in naming your problem can make your visits to doctors long and stressful. But if you are having symptoms that bother you, you need to talk with your doctor or nurse to learn how you can get some relief.

Common Autoimmune Diseases

Disease	Symptoms	Tests
Hashimoto's Thyroiditis (underactive thyroid)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tiredness • Depression • Sensitivity to cold • Weight gain • Muscle weakness and cramps • Dry hair • Tough skin • Constipation <p>You may have no symptoms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blood test for thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH)
Graves' Disease (overactive thyroid)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insomnia (not able to sleep) • Irritability • Weight loss without dieting • Heat sensitivity • Sweating • Fine brittle hair • Weakness in your muscles • Light menstrual periods • Bulging eyes • Shaky hands <p>You may have no symptoms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blood test for thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH)

Disease	Symptoms	Tests
Lupus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swelling and damage to the joints, skin, kidneys, heart, lungs, blood vessels, and brain • “Butterfly” rash across the nose and cheeks • Rashes on other parts of the body • Painful and swollen joints • Sensitivity to the sun 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An exam of your body • Lab tests (antinuclear antibody [ANA] test, blood tests, and urine tests)
Multiple Sclerosis (MS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weakness and trouble with coordination, balance, speaking, and walking • Paralysis • Tremors • Numbness and a tingling feeling in arms, legs, hands, and feet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An exam of your body • An exam of your brain, spinal cord, and nerves (a neurologic exam) • X-ray tests (magnetic resonance imaging [MRI] and magnetic resonance spectroscopy [MRS]) • Other tests on the brain and spinal cord fluid
Rheumatoid Arthritis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inflammation begins in the tissue that lines your joints. It then spreads to the whole joint. Hand joints are the most common site, but the disease can affect most joints in the body. • Muscle pain • Deformed joints • Weakness • Fatigue • Loss of appetite • Weight loss • In severe cases, becoming confined to bed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blood tests may show that you have anemia, which is when your body does not have enough red blood cells. The tests may also show that you have an antibody called rheumatoid factor (RF). However, some people with RF never get this disease. Other people who do have the disease never have this antibody.

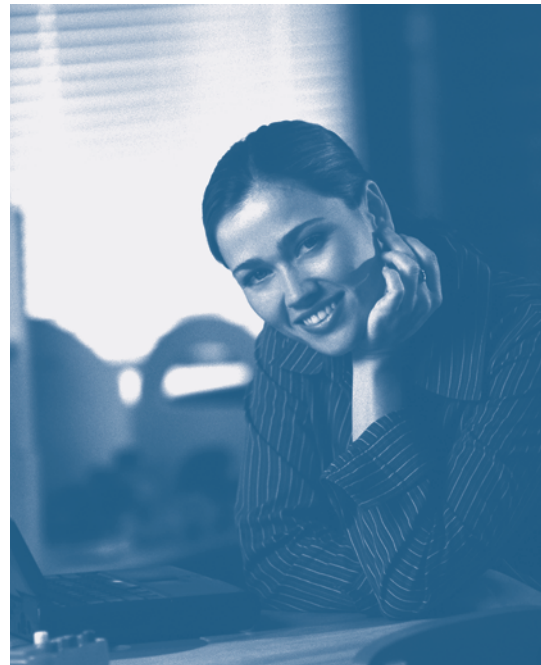


Your doctor(s) will talk to you about which medicines might work best for you. The type of medicine you take depends on which disease you have and what your symptoms are. Some people can take over-the-counter drugs, such as aspirin and ibuprofen for pain. Others with more severe symptoms may have to take certain prescription drugs to help with pain, swelling, depression, anxiety, sleep problems, fatigue, or rashes. You might also be able to take medicine to help slow the progress of your disease. New treatments for autoimmune diseases are being studied all the time.

Living with an Autoimmune Disease

You can learn to treat your symptoms and manage your disease. Women with autoimmune diseases lead full, active lives. Your life goals should not have to change. Seeing a doctor who specializes in these types of diseases is important.

Symptoms can come and go, be better or worse on different days, or they can all go away for a while. (Your symptoms can be in remission). Flare-ups, or the sudden and severe onset of symptoms, can also happen. Work closely and often with your doctor and other members of your health care team to manage your illness. If you do have a flare-up, first call your doctor. Don't try a "cure" you heard about from a friend or relative.





What You Can Do to Feel Better

- ◆ **Eat a healthy diet.** Keep your immune system as healthy as it can be! The list of nutrients you need for a healthy immune system is long. But don't try to overload on vitamins because that could be worse for your health. Eat balanced meals with foods from all of the food groups. Include yummy fruit and vegetables and whole grains. Also eat calcium-rich foods, such as fat-free milk, low-fat milk, fat-free yogurt, or low-fat yogurt. Avoid fatty foods.
- ◆ **Get regular exercise.** (But be careful not to overdo it.) Thirty minutes of physical activity most days of the week is best. But first talk with your doctor about what types of exercise you can do. A gradual

You have some power to lessen your pain! Try using *imagery* for 15 minutes, two or three times each day.

1. Put on your favorite calming music.
2. Lie back on your favorite chair or sofa. Or if you are at work, sit back and relax in your chair.
3. Close your eyes.
4. Imagine your pain or discomfort.
5. Imagine something that confronts this pain and watch it "destroy" the pain.

and gentle exercise program often works well for people with long-lasting muscle and joint pain. Some types of yoga or tai chi exercises may be helpful.





◆ **Get enough rest.** Rest allows your body tissues and joints the time they need to repair. Sleeping is a great way you can help your body and your mind. If you don't get enough sleep, your stress level and symptoms could get worse. You also can't fight off sickness as well when you sleep poorly. With enough sleep, you can tackle your problems better, and you can lower your risk for illness. Try to get at least seven hours of sleep every night.

◆ **Reduce stress and try to “self” manage your pain.** See the *Stress* chapter starting on page 120 for helpful hints on reducing stress in your life. You might be able to lessen your pain or muscle spasms if you try meditation or self-hypnosis. They may also help you deal with other aspects of living with your disease. You can learn about these practices by reading self-help books, listening to audiotapes, or working with an instructor. You also can use imagery, which is using the power of your thoughts to “destroy” your pain. You can also distract yourself from your pain by doing a hobby or something else you enjoy.





A Health Care Team Can Help

Juggling your health care needs among different doctors and other types of health care providers can be hard. But visiting other types of health care workers, along with your main doctor, may help you manage some symptoms of your disease. If you are visiting many types of health care workers, make sure you have a supportive main doctor to help you. Your family doctor may help coordinate your care.

What kind of health care team might help me?

- ◆ **Nephrologist.** A doctor who will look at how well your kidneys are working. Kidneys are organs that clean the blood and produce urine. *See page 6 to see where your kidneys are located.*
- ◆ **Rheumatologist.** A doctor who specializes in arthritis and other diseases.

- ◆ **Endocrinologist.** A doctor who specializes in diseases that affect your glands, which are organs in your body that make hormones. Glands help control the body's reproduction, energy levels, weight, food and waste production, and growth and development.
- ◆ **Physical therapist.** A health care worker who can help you with stiffness, weakness, and restricted body movement. He or she will work with you to find the proper level of exercise for your body.
- ◆ **Occupational therapist.** A health care worker who can help improve your ability to perform day-to-day activities, despite your pain and other health problems. They can recommend special equipment and devices that can help you adapt better to your environment. He or she may also make changes in your home or workplace.
- ◆ **Speech therapist.** A health care worker who can help people with multiple sclerosis (MS) and other illnesses who have speech problems.



- ◆ **Vocational therapist.** A health care worker who offers job training for people who cannot do their current jobs because of their illness or other health problems. You can find a vocational therapist through both public and private agencies.
- ◆ **Counselor for emotional support.** A health care worker who is specially trained to help you to find ways to cope with your illness. You can work through your feelings of anger, fear, denial, and frustration in a safe environment.
- ◆ **Support groups.** Some women find support and kinship by talking with others who have the same health problems. It can help them find new ways of coping with their illness.
- ◆ **Chiropractor.** A type of doctor who may help relieve some of your symptoms, such

as muscle spasms and backaches. If you are thinking of seeing a chiropractor, talk with your main doctor first. Don't visit a chiropractor *instead* of your regular autoimmune disease doctor.

Then and Now

Multiple sclerosis (MS) develops when the body's immune cells mistakenly attack the nerves in the brain and spinal cord. In the past, MS was thought to occur just in adults. Now researchers in the United States and Canada report seeing more children with the disease. Why is this number rising? Researchers think that more doctors now recognize the symptoms of MS and diagnose them correctly.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Fibromyalgia

Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) and fibromyalgia (FM) are *not* autoimmune diseases. But they often have symptoms similar to some autoimmune diseases and other illnesses. Just two of these symptoms are being tired all the time and being in pain.

- Chronic fatigue syndrome is a complex disorder that can cause you to be very tired, have trouble concentrating, feel weak, and have muscle pain. Symptoms of CFS can come and go. We don't know what causes CFS.
- Fibromyalgia is a disorder that has symptoms of widespread muscle pain, fatigue (feeling tired and having low energy), and multiple tender points. Tender points are located in the neck, spine, shoulders, hips, and knees. These areas are painful when pressure is applied to them. FM occurs mostly in women of childbearing age. But children, the elderly, and men are sometimes diagnosed with FM. We don't know what causes FM.