

AUTOIMMUNE DISEASES



Autoimmune diseases are characterized by an overactive immune system. They occur when the body mistakes healthy tissue for something harmful, causing the immune system to attack the body.

The immune system is the body's way of identifying and protecting against harmful invaders. White blood cells in the body's immune system help protect us against harmful substances, such as bacteria, viruses, toxins, cancer cells, and blood and tissue from outside the body. These substances contain antigens. The immune system produces antibodies against these antigens that enable it to destroy these harmful, foreign substances.

When you have an autoimmune disorder, your immune system does not distinguish between healthy tissue and antigens. As a result, the body sets off a reaction that destroys normal tissues.

While little is known of the origins of autoimmune diseases, they appear to be more common among women.

EXAMPLES OF THE MORE COMMON AUTOIMMUNE DISEASES INCLUDE:

- ❖ **Rheumatoid arthritis**, where immune system cells attack the joints, causing inflammation, swelling, and pain
- ❖ **Lupus**, which affects the joints, lungs, blood cells, nerves, and kidneys
- ❖ **Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)**, including ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease, which affect the lining of the intestines
- ❖ **Multiple sclerosis (MS)**, or an attack on the nerve cells that control pain, vision, and motor skills
- ❖ **Type 1 diabetes**, which destroys the insulin-producing cells of the pancreas
- ❖ **Guillain-Barre syndrome**, an attack on the nerves controlling muscles in the legs, arms, and upper body
- ❖ **Psoriasis**, which results in scaly, silver-colored plaques on the skin
- ❖ **Graves' disease** and **Hashimoto's thyroiditis**, which affect the thyroid gland
- ❖ **Myasthenia gravis**, which weakens the muscles
- ❖ **Vasculitis**, where the immune system attacks and damages blood vessels in any organ anywhere in the body

Both symptoms and treatment methods are as varied as the conditions themselves. Your doctor can help you identify and quantify the variously subtle or obvious symptoms of the diseases.

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