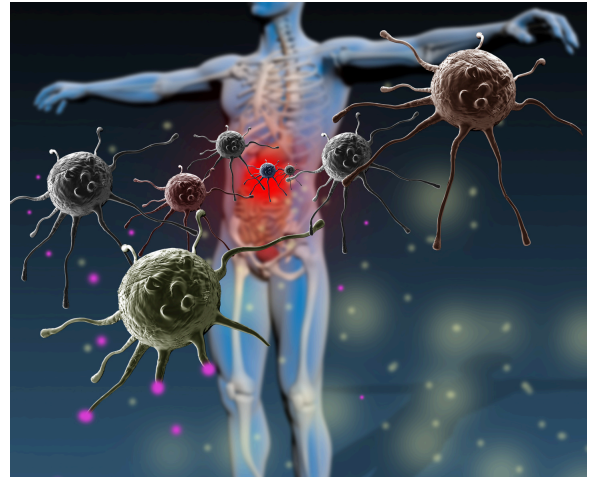


Understanding Autoimmune Diseases: Coping strategies and support.

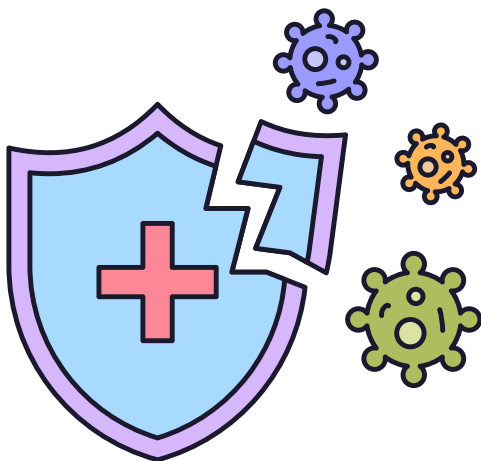
Our immune system is our defence mechanism. It works around the clock to protect us. But sometimes, it becomes confused. It attacks healthy cells, tissues, or organs. With over 80 known types, autoimmune diseases can affect almost every part of the body. They often disrupt daily life and can sometimes pose serious health risks.



What is the immune system?

The immune system is our body's natural defence mechanism. It targets all foreign particles, such as bacteria, viruses, and toxins. Also, it clears out infected or damaged cells. It has two systems:

- Innate immunity, a quick, general response to any threat
- Adaptive immunity, a slower, targeted response to specific pathogens.



How does autoimmune disease occur?

In autoimmune disease, the immune cells mistake your body's healthy cells for foreign objects. They attack these healthy cells, triggering an immune response that causes inflammation and damage to the affected area.

Why do Autoimmune diseases happen?

The exact causes are unclear, but different factors may increase the risk:

- Family history
- Environmental factors (infection, stress, chemicals)
- Hormonal changes in women
- Smoking
- Extreme sun exposure
- Age, sex, and body weight

Common autoimmune conditions:

Some of the most well-known Autoimmune diseases include:

- Type 1 diabetes
- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Hashimoto's thyroiditis
- Celiac disease
- Psoriasis
- Graves' disease
- Multiple sclerosis

Each condition affects different organs and systems, causing various symptoms.



What are the symptoms of Autoimmune diseases?

The symptoms vary depending on the condition, but common signs include:

- Fatigue
- Fever
- Joint or muscle pain
- Skin rash

More specific symptoms depend on the affected area, for example:

- Type 1 diabetes: increased thirst, frequent urination, weight loss, and tiredness
- celiac disease: abdominal pain, bloating, changes in weight, skin rashes
- Graves' disease: trouble sleeping, muscle weakness, sweating, and anxiety



How are autoimmune diseases diagnosed?

Diagnosis can be difficult because many of these illnesses have similar symptoms. That's why it's useful to:

- Know your family medical history.
- Keep a record of your symptoms.
- Consult a specialist such as a rheumatologist or an endocrinologist.

Diagnosis methods may include:

- Blood test: Autoantibody tests, inflammatory markers, complete blood count (CBC)
- Imaging: X-rays, CT scans, or MRIs
- Biopsies of the affected area
- Thyroid function tests
- Other organ-specific panels

Treatment options for autoimmune diseases

We can't cure most autoimmune diseases, but we can manage them. Treatment aims to reduce inflammation, slow the immune response, and ease symptoms:

- Corticosteroids: reduce swelling and immune activity
- Immunosuppressants: slow down the immune system
- Biologic therapies: target specific immune pathways

Your treatment plan often adjusts over time, depending on symptoms and progress.



Living well with autoimmune disease

Managing autoimmune disease means taking responsibility for your well-being. Small lifestyle changes can make a big difference:

- Eat well: choose whole foods, follow anti-inflammatory diets, and drink plenty of water.
- Stay active: walking, yoga, or swimming (advised by your doctor).
- Manage stress: try breathing exercises, journaling, or mindfulness practices.
- Get enough rest.
- Avoid smoking.
- Limit alcohol intake.
- Have regular check-ins with your healthcare team to monitor your progress.

Support groups, counselling, and online communities can help reduce isolation and provide coping strategies.



Final thoughts

Autoimmune diseases are complex but manageable. Everyone's journey is different. With proper care and education, people living with these conditions can lead a whole, empowered life.

The more we learn, the stronger we become. Knowledge is power.

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