

Editorial Note on Alternative & Integrative Medicine - Autoimmune Diseases

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Introduction

An autoimmune disease is a condition in which your immune system mistakenly attacks your body. The immune system normally guards against germs like bacteria and viruses. When it senses these foreign invaders, it sends out an army of fighter cells to attack them. Normally, the immune system can tell the difference between foreign cells and your own cells. In an autoimmune disease, the immune system mistakes part of your body, like your joints or skin, as foreign. It releases proteins called autoantibodies that attack healthy cells. Some autoimmune diseases target only one organ. Type 1 diabetes damages the pancreas. Other diseases, like systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), affect the whole body.

Doctors don't know exactly what causes the immune-system misfire. Yet some people are more likely to get an autoimmune disease than others. According to a 2014 study, women get autoimmune diseases at a rate of about 2 to 1 compared to men — 6.4 percent of women vs. 2.7 percent of men. Often the disease starts during a woman's childbearing years (ages 15 to 44). Some autoimmune diseases are more common in certain ethnic groups. For example, lupus affects more African-American and Hispanic people than Caucasians. Certain autoimmune diseases, like multiple sclerosis and lupus, run in families. Not every family member will necessarily have the same disease, but they inherit a susceptibility to an autoimmune condition.

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Because the incidence of autoimmune diseases is rising, researchers suspect environmental factors like infections and exposure to chemicals or solvents might also be involved. A "Western diet" is another suspected risk factor for developing an autoimmune disease. Eating high-fat, high-sugar, and highly processed foods is thought to be linked to inflammation, which might set off an immune response. However, this hasn't been proven.

A 2015 study focused on another theory called the hygiene hypothesis. Because of vaccines and antiseptics, children today aren't exposed to as many germs as they were in the past. The lack of exposure could make their immune system prone to overreact to harmless substances. **BOTTOM LINE:** Researchers don't know exactly what causes autoimmune diseases. Genetics, diet, infections, and exposure to chemicals might be involved.

Common autoimmune diseases

There are more than 80 different autoimmune diseases. Here are 14 of the most common ones.

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Type 1 diabetes

The pancreas produces the hormone insulin, which helps regulate blood sugar levels. In type 1 diabetes mellitus, the immune system attacks and destroys insulin-producing cells in the pancreas. High blood sugar results can lead to damage in the blood vessels, as well as organs like the heart, kidneys, eyes, and nerves.

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA)

In rheumatoid arthritis (RA), the immune system attacks the joints. This attack causes redness, warmth, soreness, and stiffness in the joints. Unlike osteoarthritis, which commonly affects people as they get older, RA can start as early as your 30s or sooner.

Psoriasis/psoriatic arthritis

Skin cells normally grow and then shed when they're no longer needed. Psoriasis causes skin cells to multiply too quickly. The extra cells build up and form inflamed red patches, commonly with silver-white scales of plaque on the skin. Up to 30 percent of people with psoriasis also develop swelling, stiffness, and pain in their joints. This form of the disease is called psoriatic arthritis.

Multiple sclerosis

Multiple sclerosis (MS) damages the myelin sheath, the protective coating that surrounds nerve cells, in your central nervous system. Damage to the myelin sheath slows the transmission speed of messages between your brain and spinal cord to and from the rest of your body. This damage can lead to symptoms like numbness, weakness, balance issues, and trouble walking. The disease comes in several forms that progress at different rates. According to a 2012 study Trusted Source, about 50 percent of people with MS need help walking within 15 years after the disease starts.

Related Journals of autoimmune diseases

Alternative Health Care Journals, Alternative Medicine Journals, Immunochemistry & Immunopathology: Open Access, Immunological Techniques in Infectious Diseases, Immunobiology, Autoimmune Diseases, Autoimmunity, Autoimmunity Highlights, Autoimmunity Reviews, Journal of Neuro-Immune Pharmacology.

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