

Autoimmune diseases: All you need to know



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Autoimmune diseases vary widely, but all involve the immune system attacking healthy tissue. Examples include psoriatic disease, rheumatoid arthritis, and celiac disease.

Autoimmune diseases can affect almost every body part or system. Together, they affect about [24 million people](#) in the United States. A further 8 million people have blood markers that make them susceptible to developing such a disease.

Common examples include psoriasis, psoriatic arthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, Hashimoto's thyroiditis, Grave's disease, inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), celiac disease, and type 1 diabetes.

This article provides an overview of some common autoimmune conditions. It also describes risk factors, the diagnostic process, and treatments.

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What is an autoimmune disease, and what causes it?

The [immune system](#) is a network of tissues, organs, and cells. Its role is to defend the body against harmful organisms, such as bacteria and viruses, warding off infection and disease.

In a person with an autoimmune disease, the immune system mistakenly attacks healthy body cells and tissues.

Researchers [do not know](#) the causes of many autoimmune conditions, but genetic factors, past infections, and environmental factors can affect their development.

Long-term treatments aim to reduce the strength of immune responses. Antibiotics have no involvement as these diseases are not bacterial infections.

What are 10 common autoimmune diseases?



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Autoimmune diseases are relatively common. According to some estimates, there are [more than 80](#) autoimmune conditions, and some are more common than others. They are a [leading cause](#) of death and disability in the country.

Below, find 10 examples of autoimmune diseases that occur frequently with their prevalence and types.

Condition	Prevalence	Types

<u>Sjogren disease</u>	Affects about <u>400,000-3.1 million adults</u> in the United States, most often in people ages 45–55 years.	N/A
<u>IBD</u>	May affect around <u>1.3% of adults in the United States</u> or around 3 million people.	The two main types are <u>Crohn's disease</u> and <u>ulcerative colitis</u> .
<u>Graves' disease</u>	Affects about <u>1 in 200</u> people and is more common in females than males.	There are <u>three types</u> : • Graves' dermopathy involves thick, flushed skin on the shins. • Graves' orbitopathy involves swelling around the eyes. • Graves' ophthalmopathy causes inflammation affecting the eye.
<u>Hashimoto's thyroiditis</u>	Affects around <u>5 in 100</u> people in the United States. It is up to 10 times more common in females than males.	N/A
<u>Lupus</u>	Affects around <u>1.5 million</u> people in the United States and 5 million people worldwide, most of whom are female.	There are <u>four types</u> : • <u>systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE)</u> • <u>cutaneous lupus erythematosus (CLE)</u> • <u>neonatal lupus</u> • <u>drug-induced lupus</u>
<u>Rheumatoid arthritis</u>	Affects about <u>1.3 million</u> adults in the United States and is 2–3 times more common in females than males.	There are three types: • seropositive • seronegative • <u>juvenile rheumatoid arthritis</u>
<u>Psoriatic arthritis</u>	Develops in about <u>3 in 10</u> people with psoriasis, but can also develop without psoriasis.	<u>Five types</u> : distal interphalangeal predominant asymmetric oligoarticular symmetric polyarthritis <u>spondylitis</u> <u>arthritis mutilans</u>
<u>Psoriasis</u>	Affects <u>more than 8 million</u> or 2–3% of the world's population.	Types include: • <u>plaque psoriasis</u> • <u>psoriasis of the scalp</u>, • <u>guttate psoriasis</u> • and <u>others</u>
<u>Celiac disease</u>	May affect as many as <u>2 million</u> people in the United States, although many more may be unaware.	Can be <u>classified</u> as: • classic • nonclassic • subclinical • potential • refractory

Type 1 diabetes

About 1 in 300 people in the United States has type 1 diabetes by 18 years of age.

Can include:

- **1a:** When the immune system is destroying typical beta cell tissue.
- **1b:** When the immune system is not destroying typical beta cell tissue or if a person has periods without needing insulin. This primarily affects people who are Black or of Asian descent.



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What are the symptoms of autoimmune disease?

Every autoimmune disease affects the body differently. They can have different symptoms and can affect different body parts. That said, some symptoms [common](#) to many conditions include:

- [Redness](#) on lighter skin, [inflammation](#), or [swelling](#)
- [pain](#)
- [fatigue](#)
- [stiffness in the joints](#)
- [muscle weakness](#)
- [rashes](#)
- [difficulty breathing](#)
- [fever](#)
- [lack of appetite](#)

What are the risk factors for getting an autoimmune disease?

Anyone can develop an autoimmune disease, but certain factors increase the risk.

Risk factors vary among the many types of autoimmune disease, but some common factors [include](#):

- **Genetics:** Some autoimmune conditions run in families. A person may inherit genes that predispose them to a condition but only develop it after exposure to a combination of triggers.
- **Environmental factors:** Sunlight, certain chemicals, and viral or bacterial infections can all affect the development of autoimmune conditions.
- **Sex:** More females have autoimmune disorders than males. Doctors believe that hormonal factors play a role. The disorders often develop during a female's reproductive age, the time between the first menstrual cycle and menopause.
- **Race:** This [appears to](#) play a role in the diagnosis and severity of certain autoimmune diseases. For example, more white people receive a diagnosis of type 1 diabetes, while lupus is more severe in African American and Hispanic people.
- **Other autoimmune conditions:** A person with one autoimmune disorder has an increased risk of developing another.

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How are autoimmune diseases diagnosed?

Diagnosing autoimmune diseases can be a challenging, lengthy process. For some, it may take years to receive the correct diagnosis. This can be due to various reasons:

- Not all symptoms always appear at the same time.
- Symptoms can be intermittent or gradually develop over time.
- Certain symptoms can overlap with the symptoms of other issues, particularly other autoimmune disorders.

For example, lupus can affect the joints similarly to rheumatoid arthritis, but the symptoms tend to be less severe. IBD causes similar symptoms to celiac disease, but IBD is not typically a result of consuming gluten.

The diagnostic process also differs depending on the specific disease. However, it usually involves [blood tests](#).

In some cases, blood tests can indicate various conditions. For instance, diagnosing Hashimoto's thyroiditis and Graves' disease requires a simple test to measure levels of thyroid hormone.

A test known as a [complete blood count](#) allows a doctor to check the levels of white and red blood cells in the body. When the immune system is fighting off something, the levels are different from the usual baseline.

A doctor may be able to diagnose an autoimmune disease by analyzing antibodies that the immune system produces. However, sometimes autoantibody blood tests are positive for many years before symptoms develop.

Other tests can indicate unusual inflammation — a fairly common issue among all autoimmune diseases. These tests include a [C-reactive protein test](#) and an [erythrocyte sedimentation rate test](#).

To help the diagnostic process, experts [recommend](#) [👤]:

- writing out a family health history
- recording symptoms over time
- consulting a specialist

As autoimmune diseases can involve a single organ or be systemic in nature and involve multiple organs, it is important for a person to meet with a specialist and discuss any precipitating events before the symptoms began. This may be something such as an infection, an injury, or particularly high stress.

If it involves a single organ such as the thyroid or pancreas, an [endocrinologist](#) — a specialist in that organ — is the best type of doctor for a person to consult. For a systemic disease involving the connective tissue, such as the joints and muscles, a [rheumatologist](#) may be the most suitable.

In many cases, it may also help to seek out a second, third, or fourth opinion.

How are autoimmune diseases treated?

While there is no cure for any autoimmune condition, treatments can reduce or eliminate symptoms, slow progression, and improve quality of life.

Specific approaches vary by condition, but common treatments include:

Relieving symptoms

This may involve taking [aspirin](#) or [ibuprofen](#) to reduce mild pain and swelling or prescribed alternatives, depending on the severity of the symptoms.

Prescription medications [can also help](#) [👤] with:

- [depression](#)

- [anxiety](#)
- fatigue
- sleep issues
- rashes

[Regular exercise](#) and a [balanced, nutritious diet](#) can also help.

Taking replacement drugs

Some autoimmune disorders affect the body's ability to produce what it needs. For instance, type 1 diabetes keeps the body from creating enough insulin, and thyroid disease prevents it from producing the right amount of thyroid hormone.

Various medications can replace these substances. A person may have [insulin injections](#) or take pills containing synthetic versions of thyroid hormone.

Taking immunosuppressants

For many people, medications that suppress the immune system can relieve the symptoms of an autoimmune disorder and slow its progression.

However, these drugs, known as immunosuppressants, can cause side effects.

Can you prevent an autoimmune disease?

While it may not be possible to prevent an autoimmune disease from developing, it may be possible to detect it at an early stage and initiate treatment.

This includes, for example, [getting regular screenings](#) [📌] if a person is known to be at risk.

What triggers an autoimmune disease?

It is advisable to avoid things that trigger the immune system reaction, which can help ease or eliminate symptoms and slow the progression of the disease.

Common triggers include:

- diet
- infection
- [smoking](#)
- [stress](#)

How do you cope with an autoimmune disease?

Every disease is different, and depending on a person's symptoms, it may be debilitating. It is important that a person consults a doctor regularly and follows all the recommended treatments.

In addition, making healthy lifestyle choices, such as eating a balanced diet and exercising regularly when possible, can go a long way toward helping relieve a person's symptoms.

People can often continue living their usual lives, but understanding one's bandwidth is important, including allowing rest periods as necessary.

It is also important to speak about how the disease is affecting a person's life with friends, family, or a support network. The [Autoimmune Association](#) offers a variety of support resources.

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Frequently asked questions

The following are commonly asked questions about autoimmune disease.

What does it mean if a person is autoimmune?

If a person has an autoimmune condition, it means that the immune system mistakenly attacks healthy body cells and tissues. This can lead to a variety of symptoms, depending on the condition.

What is the main cause of autoimmune disease?

Healthcare professionals and researchers do not know the causes of autoimmune conditions. However, they do know that environmental factors, previous infections, and genetic factors play a role in their development.

What are the most common autoimmune diseases?

A [2020 article](#)[🔗] notes that the most common autoimmune conditions include:

- psoriatic arthritis
- rheumatoid arthritis
- connective tissue diseases
- multiple sclerosis
- autoimmune thyroid diseases
- celiac diseases
- inflammatory bowel disease

Are autoimmune conditions curable?

There is [currently no cure](#) for autoimmune conditions. However, there are many treatment options available to help manage the symptoms.

Summary

There are many types of autoimmune diseases, and their symptoms can overlap. This may make it difficult to receive an accurate diagnosis.

Autoimmune conditions are a leading cause of disability and death in the United States. Anyone who believes they have signs of an autoimmune condition should contact a doctor.

Last medically reviewed on December 19, 2023

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