

## Addressing Common Autoimmune Diseases

Autoimmune diseases are complex, often elusive conditions that arise when the body's immune system mistakenly attacks its own healthy tissues. With symptoms that can mimic other health issues and vary widely between individuals, these disorders can be difficult to diagnose and even harder to manage.



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Muneera Atcha, MD, a rheumatologist with Salinas Valley Health, discusses how healthcare providers identify and diagnose these conditions, the latest advancements in testing, and the multidisciplinary approaches used to manage symptoms and support long-term health.

### What Are Autoimmune Diseases?

Autoimmune diseases occur when the body's immune system—which is designed to protect against viruses, bacteria, toxins and even cancer—mistakenly attacks its own healthy tissues. This happens when immune cells produce abnormal proteins called antibodies that target the body itself. The immune system is made up of immune cells found throughout the body—in the blood, lymph nodes, skin and the linings of the mouth and stomach.

There are over 100 autoimmune diseases, which can be broadly categorized as rheumatologic or non-rheumatologic. Common rheumatologic autoimmune diseases include rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, and psoriatic arthritis. Non-rheumatologic examples include autoimmune thyroid conditions like Graves' disease, Crohn's disease and autoimmune hepatitis.

"We do not know the exact cause of autoimmune disease. However, there are different theories researchers have suggested, such as genetics, certain infections and environmental factors or toxins like tobacco can be a risk for triggering an autoimmune disease," explains Dr. Atcha. "In addition, female hormones may have a role in certain autoimmune diseases. For example, lupus is more common in females during reproductive age. In general, females have a higher tendency of developing autoimmune disease than males.

### Autoimmune Disease Symptoms

The symptoms of autoimmune diseases—especially rheumatologic ones—vary depending on which organ or tissue the immune system attacks. For example, in rheumatoid arthritis, the immune system primarily targets the joints, leading to painful, swollen joints and prolonged morning stiffness lasting more than an hour. In contrast, Sjögren's disease affects the exocrine glands, resulting in symptoms like severe dry eyes, dry mouth and swollen glands. Overall, symptoms depend on the specific organ that is inflamed or involved.

“It can also cause joint pain and rarely can affect other organs as well. Some people can have symptoms of excessive fatigue and not feeling well in general because of the high level of inflammation,” notes Dr. Atcha.

### **Diagnosing Autoimmune Diseases**

Diagnosing autoimmune diseases can be challenging because their symptoms often mimic those of other conditions, such as infections or hormonal disorders. A thorough clinical history and physical exam are essential first steps. If autoimmune disease is suspected, diagnosis is typically supported by immunologic lab tests. Imaging studies like X-rays, CT scans, or MRIs may also be used to assess joints or internal organs. In some cases, a biopsy—such as a small sample of skin or kidney tissue—may be needed to examine cells under a microscope and confirm the diagnosis.

The Anti-Nuclear Antibody (ANA) test is a common screening tool for autoimmune diseases, but it is very non-specific. A positive result can occur in many different autoimmune conditions—or even in people without any autoimmune disease—so it cannot be used alone to make a diagnosis.

“Actually, having a positive ANA can create a lot of anxiety for some individuals because there is a common misconception that if you have a positive ANA, that means you have lupus, which is not entirely true,” assures Dr. Atcha.

### **Are Autoimmune Diseases Fatal?**

Autoimmune rheumatologic diseases—such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis, and vasculitis—can be debilitating if left untreated, though they are rarely fatal. The severity and impact depend on the organs involved and how advanced the disease is. Conditions like rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis and psoriatic arthritis can lead to joint deformities and long-term disability if not diagnosed and managed early.

“Treating in early stages is very important. When these autoimmune diseases affect major organs such as the heart, lungs or kidneys, it can be life-threatening,” cautions Dr. Atcha.

### **Managing Symptoms**

Autoimmune diseases generally have no cure because they are not caused by germs or toxins that can simply be eliminated. Instead, treatment focuses on reducing inflammation and suppressing the immune system to prevent it from attacking the body. Fortunately, many new medications are now available that target specific parts of the immune system, allowing for more precise treatment. With appropriate therapy, many autoimmune diseases can enter remission, where symptoms are minimal or inactive. Dr. Atcha also encourages individuals to engage in healthy lifestyle activities.



“A healthy lifestyle is essential to reduce cardiovascular risk with a good diet, exercise and adequate sleep. And if you have chronic illnesses—such as high cholesterol, obesity, high blood pressure, and diabetes—you should follow up with your primary care physician to reduce your risk,” she urges. “Secondly, early detection of autoimmune rheumatologic disease and treatment is very important to prevent irreparable damage to joints and organs. Lastly, following up with primary care physicians for age-appropriate vaccinations and cancer screening is also crucial, because some of the autoimmune diseases and medications can be associated with increased risk of cancer and infection.”

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