

What is an Autoimmune Disease? - The AIMS Guide

What is an Autoimmune Disease/Disorder - Overview of diseases, causes, symptoms and how and when to get NHS help.

Want to know more about Autoimmune Disease? Need to understand more about what's classed as an Autoimmune Disorder, the causes, symptoms and tests to get a diagnosis? Read our brief guide to find out more.

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What Is Autoimmune Disease?

If you want to know what an autoimmune disorder is, and what isn't, you need to understand how your immune system operates. The immune system is the human body's defence system. The immune system helps you fight off everything from the common cold to a variety of infectious diseases. When the body detects an antigen an immune response is caused.

For the immune system to operate effectively, it must be able to tell the difference between what is a part of the body and what isn't; specifically, recognising a foreign antigen and a self-antigen. If something impacts the immune system's ability to do this, an autoimmune disorder may develop. Autoimmune diseases can affect various areas of the body and, with 80 different autoimmune diseases, they can be incredibly difficult to diagnose. They can have a range of symptoms too. Signs and symptoms of autoimmune disorders include joint pain, recurring fever and skin issues, to name just a few.

What Causes Autoimmune Disease?

Ultimately, if you develop an autoimmune disease, your body will be attacking itself. The immune system is incredibly complicated, made up of organs and cells that work as a shield to protect your body from foreign invaders. When the immune system is no longer able to recognise what is a threat and what is part of the body, it creates autoantibodies which damage normal cells. While this occurs, T-lymphocytes (that are supposed to keep the autoimmune system in order) begin to fail as well, leading to an all-out attack. This is what causes autoimmune disease, but the root issue of the defect in immune systems is largely unknown. However, theories include everything from viruses, trauma, and chemical irritants, to drugs and environmental issues.

Symptoms of Autoimmune Diseases

You might be worried that you are showing signs of an autoimmune disease. It's important to be aware that many symptoms for autoimmune disease can develop with a range of different medical conditions. This is why autoimmune disease tests can be so frustrating and extensive. However, the autoimmune disease NHS website lists a variety of symptoms including:

- Low levels of energy
- Lethargy or general tiredness
- Changes in mood
- Low appetite and weight loss
- High levels of urination
- Increased thirst
- A craving for salt

This autoimmune disease symptoms checklist is not an exhaustive one. One of the issues with using something like an autoimmune disorders symptoms checker is that symptoms vary depending on the



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type of autoimmune disorder you have. Signs and symptoms of autoimmune disorders can also be mistaken for other conditions, and some seem to be correlated. For instance, studies have suggested that autoimmune hepatitis and MS share an inflammatory origin. This is particularly interesting as, while one is an autoimmune liver disease, the other impacts the nerve cells and spinal cord.

Other potential symptoms and health problems may include hair loss, numbness or a tingling feeling, difficulty concentrating, swelling and rashes. Many symptoms are also unique to a particular disorder - such as blood in your stool, often present in patients who have Crohn's disease autoimmune disorder.

For most autoimmune diseases, symptoms will flare up and then subside. You will experience remissions where symptoms disappear completely, but this does not mean your autoimmune disease has gone away or is cured.

Tests for Autoimmune Diseases

An autoimmune disease test can be irritating and time consuming for patients. No one test can tell you whether you have an autoimmune disorder, and even testing positive may not immediately provide you information on which autoimmune disease you have.

As such, doctors need to look at a number of variables to diagnose you. This can include a full medical history, a blood test for autoimmune disease and a full physical examination. A full physical examination is necessary as signs and symptoms of autoimmune systems can show up all over the body.

Blood tests will typically include tests for autoantibodies - these are produced when the defect begins to develop - and inflammation or organ function tests. Doctors will run these tests to check if your organs are working correctly, as they are typically affected.

Autoimmune Disease Treatment

There is usually no cure for autoimmune disease, but there are a variety of different autoimmune disease treatment methods for individuals suffering from autoimmune disorder symptoms. The treatment provided will often depend on the severity of the condition in question. Ultimately, the



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goal of treatment is not typically to try and cure the disease, but rather to limit the symptoms and control the process while ensuring that the body can fight back.

You might be suffering from a type of autoimmune disease that impacts the level of your thyroid hormone. Treatment will include a supplement that will provide this missing hormone. Alternatively, issues with the blood can be dealt with using a blood transfusion, while physical therapy may be needed for certain types of the disease. Autoimmune disease Lupus' symptoms include aching and swollen joints, so physical therapy can be highly effective for this condition.

Some doctors also believe that diet is a key factor in treating autoimmune diseases, and focus treatment plans around this variable. Lectins that are present in gluten and gluten substitutes have been studied as a potential cause of an autoimmune disorder. It can be useful therefore to try and identify what causes autoimmune disease flare ups for you.

Many people also end up turning to complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) as a form of treatment for an autoimmune disorder. Examples include acupuncture, chiropractic medicine and natural herbs. However, it's difficult to know how effective these treatments are for conditions like MS autoimmune.

The Most Common Autoimmune Diseases

Some of the most common autoimmune disorders are diseases that we hear about every day. People often ask, is Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) an autoimmune disorder? And is Psoriasis an autoimmune disease? Yes; these conditions commonly impact the hands, feet and wrists but can impact other areas of your body as well. In RA, your immune system begins to attack the cells in your joints by mistake, which leads to symptoms such as swelling, redness and stiffness. Whereas Psoriasis causes more skin than the body needs, which leads to red and scale-like skin. They share many symptoms such as redness, soreness and stiffness in the joints.

You may also be wondering, is Lupus an autoimmune disorder? Yes. The autoimmune disease Lupus will attack a variety of your vital organs, including your heart, and present with some sort of skin irritation. Because of this, you should not just dismiss any rash you have.

There has been a lot of debate about Multiple Sclerosis (MS) and whether it fits on an autoimmune diseases list. The debate often leaves people wondering is MS autoimmune or neurological? Due to its complex nature, the cause remains unknown, leaving researchers asking is MS an autoimmune disease? This is because MS can present with a variety of neurological symptoms. It is classed as an autoimmune disease because it attacks the protective shell of nerve cells - the myelin. MS is a problem with your central nervous system and will end up causing a problem with the delivery of messages between your brain and your body. Autoimmune MS symptoms can include issues with



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walking and coordination. You may also experience numbness in some areas of your body, plus vision, memory and cognitive problem, although this is by no means an exhaustive list.

When you consider Type I diabetes, you probably don't sit and think, is diabetes an autoimmune disease? Well, technically it is classed as an autoimmune disease because your body will attack the cells in the pancreas. It will identify and destroy the insulin cells. This is why people with Type I diabetes often need to inject insulin to make sure that the body has enough.

Getting An Autoimmune Disease NHS Diagnosis

Ultimately, Autoimmune disease UK patients will look for a diagnosis from the NHS. After asking what's an autoimmune disease, and recognising the common symptoms in themselves, people often want to see a professional. A diagnosis on the NHS can be difficult and time consuming, but there are ways to make it easier.

First, make sure that you write down a full medical history that you can provide to your doctor. This should include information about family health issues as it could relate to the symptoms. Remember that the autoimmune disorders list is long. A list will help your doctor pinpoint the potential condition that you may be suffering from. Make sure that you are keeping a check on your symptoms and try and see a specialist for those that are the most significant.

For instance, an autoimmune kidney disease will likely cause changes in your urination, while an autoimmune skin disease could show as a rash or a severe skin irritation. Be aware that some types of autoimmune disease are easier for doctors to diagnose than others. Being clear on all symptoms can really help.

Summary

Ultimately, while the autoimmune disorder definition seems simple at first glance, the symptoms and impact these diseases can have will vary and can be complex. If you do notice recurring symptoms such as joint pains or swollen glands, it's important to see a doctor. This will help you find out whether you have a condition like rheumatoid arthritis, Addison's disease, or the onset of another autoimmune disease. It's also important to be aware that women are far more likely to develop an autoimmune disorder, while certain diseases are also considered to run in families.

HSCT can be used to treat haematological-rooted autoimmune disease



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