

Autoimmune Disease: A Modern Epidemic

By Lynn Allison

The number of people with autoimmune diseases has been rising steadily over the last 30 years. According to the Autoimmune Association, more than 24 million Americans are affected by an autoimmune disease, and 80 percent are women.

The immune system normally distinguishes invading pathogens from its own cells. But immune cells can make a mistake and attack the very cells they are meant to protect. This can lead to autoimmune diseases that can affect an organ, such as Hashimoto's thyroiditis that involves the thyroid, or the whole body, such as rheumatoid arthritis or systemic lupus erythematosus.

Type 1 diabetes, multiple sclerosis, and vitiligo are other examples of organ-specific autoimmune diseases. Gluten sensitivity is a common example of a systemic autoimmune disorder that seems to be prevalent today.

Robert G. Lahita, M.D., director of the Institute for Autoimmune and Rheumatic Disease at St. Joseph's Health, in Paterson, N.J., and the author of "Immunity Strong," says that gluten can become a trigger for the immune system. "Autoimmunity happens in our body as a normal process," Lahita tells *Health Radar*. "It's not a harmful thing until disease develops. But it is possible that autoimmunity is a major aspect of inflammation, and consequently at the root of our most common

diseases such as those affecting the heart, lungs, and brain."

Lahita confirms that the incidence of autoimmune diseases is increasing, and that the spectrum of autoimmunity is huge, possibly because doctors are recognizing them better and we have more accurate diagnostic testing. Lupus, the prototypical autoimmune disease, and affects about 5 million people worldwide.

"We call lupus a multisystemic disease because it affects almost any organ of the body; the organs most likely to be affected are the kidneys, brain and skin and more rarely the heart and lungs," says Lahita. "The antibodies found in this disease are as numerous as food on a giant buffet."

Jacob Teitelbaum, author of "From Fatigued to Fantastic!" tells *Health Radar* that autoimmune and immune illnesses may well be the key health issues of the 21st century.

"We have 85,000 new chemicals in our environment, and are suffering from 30 percent less sleep over the last 150 years," he says. "We're also eating too many highly processed foods that lack the nutrients, but not the calories, of whole foods, so we've become undernourished and obese."

The bewildering part about autoimmune disease is that we don't know what exactly triggers the immune system to go haywire, so it's difficult to treat the underlying cause.

"Even after 50 years of research in lupus, we still don't know why sunlight causes some patients

to have a flare-up or why lupus disproportionately affects women of childbearing age," says Lahita, who is a world-renowned expert on the disease.

Effective Management

The primary treatment for autoimmune conditions is to prescribe immunosuppressant drugs which, by definition, suppress the immune system. Getting enough rest, mild exercise, eating a healthy, balanced diet with lots of protein and vegetables may help. Stress can also exacerbate the symptoms of an autoimmune disease, so coping with stress or depression is recommended.

Teitelbaum suggests seeking advice from a holistic physician who can help tailor treatments to specific conditions. For example, some studies have found that taking the supplement DHEA is helpful for people suffering from lupus. The herb boswellia may reduce gut inflammation in Crohn's disease.

In general, to safeguard your immune system, Teitelbaum recommends taking a high quality multivitamin that contains zinc, retinol, and vitamin D, along with reducing your intake of sugar and saturated fat. Getting eight hours of quality sleep is also beneficial. □

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