

Autoimmune Disorders

The immune system makes an abundance of proteins called antibodies. Antibodies are made by white blood cells (B cells). The antibodies recognize and combat infectious organisms (germs) in the body. Antibodies develop in our immune system to help the body fight infectious organisms. When an antibody recognizes the foreign proteins of an infectious organism, it recruits other proteins and cells to fight off the infection. This cascade of attack is called inflammation.



Sometimes these antibodies make a mistake, identifying normal, naturally-occurring proteins in our bodies as being “foreign” and dangerous. When these antibodies make incorrect calls, identifying a naturally-occurring protein (or self-protein) as foreign, they are called autoantibodies. Autoantibodies start the cascade of inflammation, causing the body to attack itself. The antibodies that target “normal” proteins within the nucleus of a cell are called antinuclear antibodies (ANA). Most of us have autoantibodies, but typically in small amounts. The presence of large amount of autoantibodies or ANAs can indicate an autoimmune disorder. ANAs could signal the body to begin attacking itself which can lead to autoimmune disorders.

Lab evaluation usually includes a screening test for Antinuclear Antibodies (ANA) “ANA” as well as general blood work and specific labs that measure inflammation in the body. A positive ANA test means autoantibodies are present. By itself, a positive ANA test does not indicate the presence of an autoimmune disorder or the need for therapy. ANA testing can produce a “false positive.” This typically signals the presence of antinuclear antibodies in a healthy individual. Positive ANA test results are reported with a “titer”, this gives us an idea of how severe the autoimmune attack is. A 1:80 to 1:160 is considered a “weak” titer. Titers of 1:320 and higher, with significant symptoms of autoimmune disorder may warrant a referral to a rheumatologist.

Symptoms:

Fatigue	Difficulty swallowing	Dry mouth & eyes	Weight loss/gain
Fever	Tremors	Blood clots	Family history of autoimmune
Joint Pain/stiffness	Facial/body rash	Easy bruising	Insomnia
Joint nodules	Hair Loss/brittle hair	Multiple miscarriages	Depression
Muscle pain	Yellowing of skin/eyes	Irregular periods	Anxiety
Muscle weakness	Itchy/dry skin	Abdominal pain	Headache
Impaired balance	Tight/shiny/thick skin	Enlarged liver	
Neuropathy	Oral ulcers	Diarrhea/constipation	



Autoimmune disorders are more common in women. Symptoms can also be associated with many health conditions and can come and go based on the activity of the immune system. Because of this, many women spend years and see several different health care providers before their disorder is recognized.

Most rheumatologists will not treat autoimmune disorders until the damage to the body is significant enough to warrant treatment. This is because most of the prescription medications to treat autoimmune disorders are very hard on the body and have significant side effects and risks.

Autoimmune disorders can be treated, but prevention is the best treatment of all. Going through a thorough assessment to identify the factors that are causing your immune system to overreact is the first step. Most of the time, patients see improvement after making dietary and lifestyle changes. These changes can keep the immune system in check and stop the disorder from progressing, causing damage to the body and leading to further health conditions and the need for additional medications.

Women with one autoimmune disorder are at a higher risk of developing additional autoimmune disorders. Even more motivation to make the following lifestyle changes!

Lifestyle Recommendations

Diet: Eat a clean diet as free of preservatives and processed foods as possible. Avoid excess sugar and increase your servings of brightly colored fruits and vegetables. Consider the following supplements to help support a healthy immune system and decrease inflammation.

N-Acetyl Cysteine	Zinc
Vitamin C	Omega EPA & DHA
Vitamin E	CoQ10
Vitamin D	Melatonin
Magnesium	Probiotics

Exercise: Aim for at least 30-45 minutes daily. Incorporate stress relieving exercise such as yoga.

Sleep: Practice good sleep hygiene and make sure you're are getting at least 7 hours of restful sleep nightly. If you don't feel rested when you wake up or have symptoms of a sleep disorder get evaluated by a sleep specialist.

Stress Reduction: Stress is a large activator of the immune system. Stress comes in many different forms, physical and emotional stress equally contribute to immune system activation.