

SYMPTOMS THAT MAY INDICATE AUTOIMMUNITY

HOW IS AUTOIMMUNE DISEASE DIAGNOSED?



Illustration by Jason Perez

Because it is not yet considered a group of diseases, there are no physicians who specialize in autoimmune disease. Instead, patients must seek specialists depending on the organ(s) or system(s) affected.

As a general rule, autoimmune disease is difficult to diagnose. Many people struggle with symptoms, going from specialist to specialist and enduring test after test, to no avail—at least until the disease has progressed to the point at which the symptoms are severe, predictable, and fit into a pattern consistent with a specific autoimmune disease. Unfortunately, there is no single test that can definitively determine whether you have an autoimmune disease. Rather, doctors must piece together clues from medical histories, symptoms, physical exams, laboratory tests (most commonly blood tests), radiography results, and biopsies.

Blood tests to diagnose an autoimmune disorder may include analysis of:

- Antinuclear antibodies
- Autoantibodies
- CBC (complete blood count) and/or CBC with differential
- C-reactive protein (CRP)
- Erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR; aka sed rate)
- Food sensitivities/allergies
- Hormone levels
- Micronutrient deficiency
- Organ function
- Secretory IgA antibodies

ARE YOU AT RISK FOR AUTOIMMUNITY?

There is no way to predict whether you will develop an autoimmune disease, although having family members with autoimmune diseases increases your odds of developing one yourself. If you do get one, it's often not the same disease a family member has. Studies measuring the percentage of healthy individuals who have autoantibodies (antibodies that can attack their own cells) in their blood show that a staggering 20–30 percent of healthy people are potentially already in the very early stages of autoimmune disease (although the development of autoimmune disease requires more than just the formation of autoantibodies).

Early signs of autoimmune disease can be especially difficult to attribute to a specific condition. Other than experiencing the “minor” complaints listed below, people may remain symptom-free for years or even decades. Any of these symptoms can be associated with the early stages of autoimmune disease:

- Allergies
- Anxiety and depression
- Blood pressure changes (usually low)
- Digestive problems
- Extreme fatigue
- Gallbladder disease
- Low blood sugar
- Malaise (generally feeling unwell)
- Memory problems
- Migraines
- Muscle or joint pain
- Muscle weakness
- PMS
- Rashes and other skin problems
- Recurrent headaches
- Resistance to weight loss
- Sleep disturbances
- Susceptibility to infections
- Swollen glands
- Thyroid problems
- Unexplained weight changes
- Yeast infections

If you have any of these symptoms, don't panic—it doesn't necessarily mean that you will develop autoimmune disease. (There may be other causes of these symptoms.) However, if you are suffering from any of these symptoms, you don't have to put up with the discomfort. All these symptoms can be alleviated with the diet and lifestyle changes in *The Paleo Approach*. Most important, *you have an opportunity—the opportunity to prevent autoimmune disease from developing!*

It is also worth mentioning that several ailments are known to occur very frequently in conjunction with autoimmune disorders. They are:

- Cholangitis
- Chronic fatigue syndrome
- Eczema
- Fibromyalgia
- Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS); this occurs frequently in conjunction with autoimmune thyroid diseases

These are not autoimmune diseases themselves (or at least have not been confirmed as such), but because of their association with autoimmune disease, they may indicate that an autoimmune disease is present. If you suffer from one of these conditions, it is a sign that it's time to make diet and lifestyle changes to keep autoimmunity at bay.

