What doctors
tell their
friends about
autoimmune
diseases

It’s not just you—it really does seem like
everyone has one these days, and women are
far more likely than men to join the ranks.
While researchers work to find out why, know
the signs and be your own best advocate.

BY STEPHANIE WOOD

HOW THEY MAY START
“The immune system is like the
body’s army—it spends the earliest
years of your life distinguishing
friends from enemies so it can protect
you from invaders. Our culture has
become so fastidious about hygiene,
however, that doctors worry the
immune system may not encounter
many threats until adolescence or
beyond, when it’s more likely to make
a mistake. It’s not uncommon for an
autoimmune attack on, say, your
joints or thyroid to first happen or
flare after an unrelated virus or
infection. And an autoimmune attack
can come seemingly out of nowhere,
possibly due to a combination of
genetics and the environment.”
—Anca Askariane, M.D., associate
professor of medicine at Columbia
University’s Irving Medical Center and
director of the Columbia Lupus Center

WHAT YOU CAN DO
If you have
symptoms of something new
shortly after you’ve recovered from
an infection, see your doctor.

GET A SECOND OPINION
“Many autoimmune diseases—
including lupus, rheumatoid
arthritis, multiple sclerosis, and
Hashimoto’s thyroiditis—have
symptoms in common, and that’s just
one reason diagnosis is so difficult.
Often one of the first clues is extreme
fatigue, which might be dismissed by
doctors as simply a consequence of
motherhood or being overworked.
Also, there’s no one blood test for
these diseases, and the ones that exist
aren’t foolproof. One woman I know
was tired and stressed and losing her
hair, but her doctor thought her levels
of ANA—the rogue antibodies in the
blood of patients with lupus or
rheumatoid arthritis—were relatively
normal. A year later, she had
developed the classic lupus butterfly
rash on her face as well as painful,
swollen joints, and her ANA levels
were much higher.” —Dr. Askariane

WHAT YOU CAN DO
Push for answers.
“If you’re chronically tired, to the
point that everyday activities wipe you
out, that's not normal," she says. "And fatigue accompanied by muscle or joint pain, recurring fever, rashes, swollen glands, hair loss, or mouth sores is a red flag—get checked."

**TUMMY TROUBLE MAY BE A SIGN**

"A friend recently asked if her cramps and frequent trips to the bathroom could be serious. I explained that inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)—a group of autoimmune disorders that cause chronic inflammation of the digestive tract—has symptoms that set it apart from stomach bugs. Your stools may be bloody, and you might also rush to the bathroom in the middle of the night or suffer from night sweats, chills, and fever."

—Nelanjana Nandi, M.D., director of the Center for Inflammatory Bowel Diseases at Drexel University College of Medicine in Philadelphia

**WHAT YOU CAN DO**

Dr. Nandi's friend, since diagnosed with the common IBD disorder Crohn's disease, has changed her diet and exercise routine. "Fiber can help suppress gut inflammation between flares; light exercise triggers the release of feel-good endorphins and helps relieve stress. I also recommend 2,000 to 3,000 IUs of vitamin D daily," Dr. Nandi says.

**THEY MIGHT BE THE REASON YOU'RE DOWN**

"A woman I know was under a lot of stress from taking care of her sick mom. When her gynecologist asked how she was doing, she burst into tears. She told him she was constantly exhausted and overwhelmed and couldn't seem to remember anything. He chalked it up to the hormonal swings and anxiety that often come with perimenopause and wrote her a prescription for an antidepressant. It helped some, but she still had days when she crawled back into bed after seeing her kids off. When she went to her primary care doctor, blood work revealed something else: Hashimoto's thyroiditis, an autoimmune disorder that slowly damages the thyroid. Symptoms include fatigue, increased sensitivity to cold, dry skin, brittle nails, hair loss, memory lapses, brain fog, and irregular or heavy periods, many of which can be mistakenly brushed off as perimenopause or depression."

—Mary Vouyiouklis Kelis, M.D., a board-certified endocrinologist at Cleveland Clinic

**WHAT YOU CAN DO**

"If you have any of these symptoms, especially in combination with constipation and weight gain, insist that your doctor check your thyroid levels," she says.

**THERE ARE WAYS TO FEEL STRONGER**

"Any autoimmune disorder can take an emotional toll. Some diseases may disrupt hormones that play a role in regulating mood, while others keep the body from properly absorbing nutrients beneficial to the brain. But they can all make it more difficult for you to do the things you love with the people you love, creating stress that affects"

**AUTOIMMUNITY, BY THE NUMBERS**

You can't scroll through Instagram without being reminded how prevalent autoimmune illnesses are—Selena Gomez's kidney transplant, for instance, was needed due to a complication of lupus. AI disorders develop when the immune system mistakes healthy cells for an invader and makes autoantibodies, proteins in the blood meant to neutralize the threat. But because there is no actual danger, these autoantibodies go on to harm healthy cells. Here's what else you should know:

50 MILLION

...and climbing—that's the estimated number of Americans affected by autoimmune disease.

100

The number of known AI diseases. They hit different body parts and systems, big—your digestive tract and skin (ulcerative colitis and psoriasis, respectively)—and small, like insulin-producing cells and hair follicles (type 1 diabetes and alopecia).

4

On average, patients see four doctors over nearly four years before being diagnosed. That's in part because symptoms can seem unrelated. Keep a list of any unusual symptoms, however mild or infrequent.
relationships, finances, work, and sleep. That 'fight or flight' response sends a surge of hormones and immune signals through the body, which can increase inflammation and make symptoms worse. It can be a vicious cycle!" —Sarah Gray, Psy.D., clinical health psychologist and instructor of psychology at Harvard Medical School and founder of Integrative Psychology and Behavioral Medicine in Arlington, MA.

WHAT YOU CAN DO "Thankfully, there are treatments that can help improve mood and ease physical symptoms," she says. "One woman I know who has IBD tried biofeedback combined with relaxation training, and it helped so much that she started practicing those techniques and meditation on her own, which empowered her to better handle her illness."

YOUR DIET REALLY MATTERS "My father had polymyositis, a rare, painful autoimmune condition that attacks and weakens the muscles. For years he'd been on powerful medications that suppressed his immune system but left him vulnerable to infection. His eating habits made me crazy, because up to 80% of the immune system is housed in the gut in the form of trillions of bacteria and other microorganisms. A diet high in inflammatory foods such as refined carbs, sugar, and alcohol feeds the bad bacteria. When they grow out of control, the immune system becomes suppressed, which makes it less able to combat threats and more likely to fire on your own tissues by mistake." —Amy Myers, M.D., author of The Autoimmune Solution, The Autoimmune Solution Cookbook, and The Thyroid Connection

WHAT YOU CAN DO When he was about to have hip surgery that would put him at even greater risk of infection, Dr. Myers finally persuaded her dad to try eliminating gluten, yeast, and sugar from his diet. "Not only did he recover relatively quickly, but his inflammatory markers went down, and he was able to stop taking the medications altogether," she says.

THERE'S REAL PROGRESS BEING MADE IN TREATMENT "A graduate student I know who was an avid runner started to experience numbness in her feet. A week or so later, it had crept up to her knees, then her waist. She was diagnosed with an inflammation of the spinal cord that is an early symptom of multiple sclerosis (MS), a chronic inflammatory disease of the central nervous system. Eighty percent of people with MS have an early episode that's a very clear warning sign. They may have numbness and tingling in their lower body, an inflammation of the nerve behind the eye that causes pain and vision problems, or a brain stem attack, which can cause vertigo or double vision." —Ellen Lathi, M.D., a board-certified neurologist and codirector of the Elliott Lewis Center for Multiple Sclerosis in Boston

WHAT YOU CAN DO "If you have one of these symptoms, get checked out right away," says Dr. Lathi. "Left untreated, symptoms of MS can come and go for years, but early and aggressive treatment makes repeated attacks and future disability much less likely."

Years ago, at least 60% of MS patients would be disabled within eight to 15 years of diagnosis, she says, but "now we have an excellent chance of delaying, limiting, and potentially preventing disability over time."

New hope for a cure

Seventy-five percent of autoimmune sufferers are women, but why remains a medical mystery. "We can tell that women have a stronger immune response in general, because men are about twice as likely to get cancer and infections," says Johann Gudjonsson, M.D., Ph.D., the Arthur C. Curtis Professor of Skin Molecular Immunology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. "That stronger response is a double-edged sword. It's good for protection, but it predisposes women to an out-of-control immune system." Hoping to learn why women are at greater risk, Dr. Gudjonsson and a colleague measured tens of thousands of genes in skin samples. They found a striking distinction: A total of 661 genes—many of which were related to immune function—were expressed, or turned on, differently in women than in men. "We also identified a gene known as VGLL3, a master regulator of inflammation and autoimmunity," he says. "In our analysis of healthy skin samples, it was active only in women. But in the skin samples of people with lupus, VGLL3 was activated in men as well."

Now they're working to find a way to turn this gene down or all the way off. Dr. Gudjonsson is hopeful: "It's exciting to tell patients and friends that we may find new ways to treat and prevent autoimmune diseases that we couldn't imagine before."