

# Spotlight on Health

## Autoimmune Rheumatic Diseases

In autoimmune diseases, your body mistakenly attacks your own tissue as if it were fighting an infection. If the affected tissue includes joints and the tissue that connects parts of the body together (connective tissue), then this is called an autoimmune rheumatic disease (ARD).<sup>1</sup> ARDs can lead to great pain that affects your everyday life. Some carry an increased risk of death. You or your doctor may have a hard time telling if you have an ARD, because symptoms can come and go. Being certain of what ARD you may have is important, because treatments can be different. And early diagnosis and treatment usually leads to better outcomes.

This newsletter will help you understand what ARDs are. It will also explain why an accurate diagnosis is important, and how blood tests can help your healthcare provider make a correct diagnosis.

### The Immune System and Autoimmune Diseases

Your immune system protects your body from infections. If you cut your hand, the immune system helps the wound from becoming infected. If you have a cold, the immune system helps you fight the virus that is making you sick. But the immune system can cause swelling, redness, and soreness (inflammation) and other symptoms that make you feel worse at first.

One of the ways the immune system works is by making substances in your blood called antibodies. Antibodies help remove germs that enter your body, like viruses and bacteria. However, sometimes the immune system stops working the way it should. Instead of attacking germs, it makes *auto*antibodies that attack parts of your own body.<sup>1</sup> When this happens, it is called an autoimmune disease.

Women get autoimmune diseases more than twice as much as men (6.4% of women compared to 2.7% of men).<sup>2</sup> Different autoimmune diseases can occur at different times in a person's life. Women are most commonly diagnosed with an autoimmune disease when they are between 14 and 44 years old.<sup>2</sup>

There are over 80 known autoimmune diseases (see the websites listed in the *Additional Information* section).<sup>2</sup> This newsletter focuses primarily on ARDs.

### Autoimmune Rheumatic Diseases

Rheumatic diseases cause inflammation of the joints, muscle, and connective tissue. Most are autoimmune but some, like gout, have other causes. Some ARDs can also affect other parts of the body like the skin, heart, and other organs. A common ARD you might have heard of is rheumatoid arthritis.

### Diagnosis

The diagnosis of ARDs is complicated. For many of these diseases, the symptoms are similar and can be general, like aching in the joints and not feeling well (see Sidebar).<sup>1,3</sup> Because of this, laboratory testing may be needed to help confirm a diagnosis.



### Symptoms of Autoimmune Diseases

The early symptoms of autoimmune diseases can be similar to one another and may come and go. They may include<sup>1,3</sup>

- Muscle aches
- Fatigue
- Swelling and redness over the joints
- Mild fever
- Trouble concentrating
- Rashes
- Hair loss
- Numbness and tingling in the hands and feet

Remember, if you have an ARD, your immune system produces autoantibodies that attack different parts of your own body. Different autoantibodies are produced in different diseases. Testing your blood for different autoantibodies can help diagnose which ARD you have.<sup>4</sup>

Knowing which (if any) ARD a person has is important.<sup>1,3</sup> Some ARDs, such as lupus, can become severe and require intensive therapy. Others can be relatively mild and require only close monitoring.

### How Your Doctor Can Help

No single test can diagnose most autoimmune diseases. Your doctor will use a combination of tests, an assessment of your symptoms, and examination, to make a diagnosis. He or she will likely test for different autoantibodies to help diagnose an ARD. Sometimes, your doctor will order testing for a number of different autoantibodies at the same time to make a diagnosis faster.

Your doctor may refer you to a specialist if he or she thinks you have an ARD. A rheumatologist is a specialist who treats ARDs, such as rheumatoid arthritis, and other autoimmune diseases.

### How the Laboratory Can Help

Quest Diagnostics offers tests for the many different antibodies that are associated with autoimmune diseases. Quest also offers “panels.” A panel is a group of tests that are done together. Quest’s autoimmune panel tests look for many different autoantibodies at the same time, and can be done with a single blood draw. Testing for many different autoantibodies at the same time may help your doctor make a diagnosis faster and begin treatment as early as possible.

### Additional Information

For more information, visit the MedlinePlus website, [MedlinePlus.gov/autoimmunediseases.html](http://MedlinePlus.gov/autoimmunediseases.html), or these helpful websites:

- The American College of Rheumatology: [Rheumatology.org/I-Am-A/Patient-Caregiver](http://Rheumatology.org/I-Am-A/Patient-Caregiver)
- WebMD: [WebMD.com/a-to-z-guides/autoimmune-diseases](http://WebMD.com/a-to-z-guides/autoimmune-diseases)
- American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association: [AARDA.org](http://AARDA.org)
- United States Department of Health & Human Services: [WomensHealth.gov/a-z-topics/autoimmune-diseases](http://WomensHealth.gov/a-z-topics/autoimmune-diseases)

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