

Spotlight on Health

Autoimmune Rheumatic Diseases

Autoimmune rheumatic diseases (ARDs) are a group of conditions in which there is an abnormal immune response to a normal part of the body.¹ They can lead to severe, debilitating pain. Some carry an increased risk of death. Being certain of what disease you may have is important, because treatments can be different. And an early diagnosis and treatment usually leads to a better outcome.

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 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. It also helps prevent the cold from becoming something more serious, such as pneumonia. But the immune system can cause inflammation and other symptoms that make you feel worse at first.

One of the ways the immune system works is by making antibodies. The antibodies help remove germs that enter your body, such as 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.¹ When this happens, it is called an autoimmune disease.

Women get autoimmune diseases about twice as much as men (6.4% of women compared to 2.7% of men).² 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.²

There are over 80 known autoimmune diseases (see the websites listed in the *Additional Information* section).³ This newsletter focuses primarily on ARDs.

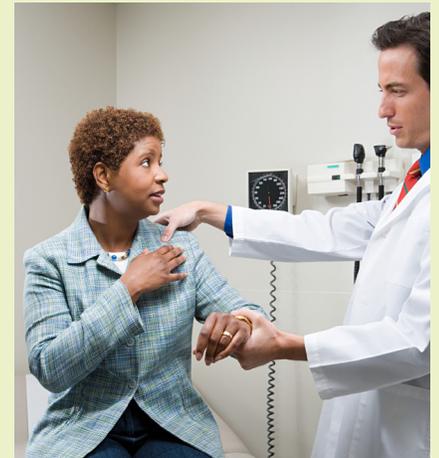
Autoimmune Rheumatic Diseases

Rheumatic diseases cause inflammation of the joints and other tissues in the body like tendons and muscles. 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 (sidebar). Because of this, laboratory testing may be needed to help confirm a diagnosis.

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 the ARD you have.



Symptoms of Autoimmune Diseases

The early symptoms of autoimmune diseases can be similar to one another. They may include²:

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

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

How Your Healthcare Provider Can Help

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

Your primary healthcare provider 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. It also offers “panels.” A panel is a group of tests that are done together. The Quest Diagnostics 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 can help your healthcare provider make a diagnosis faster and begin treatment as early as possible.

Additional Information

For more information, visit the MedlinePlus website, <https://medlineplus.gov/autoimmunediseases.html>, or these helpful websites:

- **The American College of Rheumatology:**
<https://www.rheumatology.org/I-Am-A/Patient-Caregiver>
- **WebMD:** <https://www.webmd.com/a-to-z-guides/autoimmune-diseases>
- **American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association:**
<https://www.aarda.org/diseaselist/>
- **Womenshealth.gov. Autoimmune diseases.**
<https://www.womenshealth.gov/a-z-topics/autoimmune-diseases>

References

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2. Autoimmune diseases: types, symptoms, causes and more. Healthline website. <https://www.healthline.com/health/autoimmune-disorders>. Accessed March 13, 2018.
3. Autoimmune diseases. National Institutes of Health. National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences website. <https://www.niehs.nih.gov/health/topics/conditions/autoimmune/index.cfm>. Accessed March 13, 2018.

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