

The Autoimmune Solution: 7 Natural and Effective Treatments

(Your doctor won't tell you)

By Cynthia Quattro, P.A., L.Ac., DAOM

Autoimmune disease is a medical mystery. In the United States alone, it is estimated that 23 million people suffer from some form of autoimmune disease. Its devastating effects can be long lasting and impact multiple organ systems. In reality, even patients who have seen some of the “best doctors” for their condition, in the end, are often prescribed one medication called prednisone, a steroid, as a last resort, for an indefinite period of time.

Since the cause of autoimmune conditions is essentially unknown, treating it is a challenge. What adds to the medical mystery is that there are few “typical” signs and symptoms. Usually depending on where the immune system has gone wrong, each person has their own unique signs and symptoms which can vary from day to day. While patients continue to suffer from sometimes debilitating symptoms, doctors, typically will schedule these patients for a 10 minute visit, scratch their head and refer to the next specialist. It's not uncommon to be prescribed an antidepressant, a pain relieving medication, nerve sedation, and ultimately steroids to alleviate their patient's persistent complaints.

What causes the immune system to go wrong?

If the best research has not discovered why the immune system can derail, then deeper questions arise. These questions extend beyond standard care medical protocols that are insurance-based golden standards for treatment.

For example: Could these conditions be caused by a nutritional deficiency? A bacterial toxin or hidden virus? A failing immune system? Medication interactions? Hormone imbalance? Faulty genes? Or is it the impact of the environment that triggers the immune system to go wrong?

Integrative Medicine

Integrative Medicine is not a new form of medicine; it is an amalgam or blend of established medicinal approaches to encourage wellness and focus more on the underlying cause of disease.

It uses more natural forms of medicine. It integrates a more functional approach to look at how the body interacts with its own internal and external environment. It includes evaluating nutritional influences, lifestyle routines, and interactions of medical treatments. Oriental medicine, although a separate medicinal system of treatment, complements an integrative medicine approach. Western medicine is also not excluded and is used as necessary especially to help with making an accurate diagnosis.

What is autoimmunity?

Autoimmunity is defined in standard medical terminology as a condition that occurs when the immune system mistakenly attacks and destroys healthy body tissue.

Essentially what this means is that, for some reason, the immune system is triggered to attack its own self. It usually targets one particular organ system, although, if untreated, can progress and include multiple organ systems.

A Complicated Case

For example, one of the most common organs that is prone to immune dysfunction is the thyroid. There are many women (although there are a small percentage of men) who have had symptoms of autoimmune thyroid disease for years without having an accurate diagnosis.

The cases I have seen are women who complain of headache, anxiety, fatigue, inability to focus, palpitations, menstrual irregularities and weight fluctuations. These are the most common symptoms but sometimes the symptoms are more subtle. Any one of the symptoms may wax and wane at random times or may be grouped together. They typically don't notice an association of their symptoms with any other medical condition.

Many of them have had multiple visits with their doctors and specialists who commonly prescribe a separate medication for each symptom complaint. Often, by the time I see them in my office, they have a small pharmaceutical collection of medications they use, depending on what symptom is predominant. They have migraine medication, pain pills, anti-anxiety pills and antidepressants. Sometimes they have heart medicine, anti-inflammatory pills and a steroid such as prednisone. And when I ask about their thyroid, they typically say "oh yes, that was checked and my doctor says its fine".

The numbers may be fine according to how the doctor interpreted them, but the patient isn't, and this calls to action a medical strategy that looks beyond the obvious to find out what has gone awry and where we aim to improve the patient's quality of life.

Stephanie

Take for example the case of Stephanie. She came to see me because she couldn't sleep. It was disrupting her schedule and her marriage. She would have trouble falling asleep and would frequently wake up with palpitations. Her heart was racing and pounding so hard she couldn't sleep. She would often feel anxious, have difficulty going back to sleep and feel fatigued the following day. This created a pattern of no sleep, tiredness during the day and agitation. She had seen her primary care doctor and a cardiologist who both claimed she was fine and was probably just overly worried. She was prescribed an anti-anxiety medication to take if she woke up, which they said should calm her heart and allow her to go back to sleep.

She did try the medication for a while but found she had episodes during the day that would last for hours. Her heart felt like it was pounding in her chest and was very uncomfortable. She had changed her diet to remove any sources of caffeine, sweeteners and artificial preservatives, without any change in her symptoms. It was frustrating for her since she didn't have these symptoms everyday but would have them for a period of days, then they would stop and return again without a detectable pattern.

On her first visit, when I examined her thyroid area, she claimed it felt mildly tender although nothing seemed abnormally swollen. An ultrasound revealed an enlargement of her thyroid, with two small nodules. Her thyroid tests were normal but the thyroid antibody titers were mildly elevated. In her case, these thyroid tests showed her thyroid was inflamed and since she had developed nodules on the thyroid gland, it indicated it had been functioning abnormally for some time.

She was relieved to finally have a diagnosis that explained why she was having these symptoms. And she also knew now that although she didn't have a life threatening condition, it was one that was could be difficult to treat. It would require a combination of treatments to calm her thyroid activity and prevent it from randomly flaring up.

Inflammation

The core pathology underlying most autoimmune conditions is inflammation.

Normally, inflammation is considered an immediate response to an injury or infection. This would be the typical inflammation seen during an acute injury or infection. If treated quickly, it usually resolves quickly. Immediate inflammatory reactions are typically a response to alert the body the need to repair itself. What is more concerning, is when there is an ongoing, smoldering inflammation that is underpinning a chronic disease resistant to treatment. The chronic wear and tear of organ tissue trying to heal itself, stresses the targeted organ system and gradually destroys its normal function. The effect on one organ can lead to effects on related organs and contributes to a rapid decline in health.

Integrative Medicine

In Stephanie's case, she began taking natural anti-inflammatory supplements which included targeted proteolytic (protein deconstruction) enzymes. She used herbal sedatives to calm the heart and nutrient co-factors to support normal thyroid function. She was prescribed a heart medication, a beta blocker, to calm her heart palpitations only if she needed it, and she received acupuncture to regulate her nervous system. Gradually, her symptoms subsided, and if she did have an episode of heart palpitations she was able to recognize what might have triggered it and adjust her treatment accordingly. Her sleep improved, she felt more rested and her quality of life significantly improved.

Integrative Medicine is a whole system approach. It doesn't rely on one treatment and doesn't primarily focus on prescribed drugs to suppress symptoms. It is considered a functional approach, looking at what is not functioning normally and aiming to correct the body's normal function.

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Unfortunately, most medical doctors, even after investing an extensive amount of time and money to practice medicine, in the end, are limited to two treatments for their patients; pharmaceutical medications and surgical interventions. Almost anything else is considered unorthodox and even unethical.

What is even more unfortunate is if their patients request a more natural approach for their condition, the medical doctor will only commit to standard care protocols and will often suggest that anything else is unsafe.

Integrative Medicine offers treatments that allow the body to respond gradually according to its own natural physiology. Each treatment method addresses a different aspect that contributes to the bigger picture that needs attention.

There are seven areas of focus for a whole body system treatment approach:

1. **Diet** – an anti-inflammatory diet is essential to arrest an inflammatory disease progression

2. **Nutrition** – dietary supplements and herbal preparations act as co factors to encourage an anti-inflammatory body chemistry
3. **Blood circulation** – is the vehicle that allows food and nutrients to reach the vast amount the body's cellular spaces
4. **Hormones** –are the messengers that communicate signals to reach each and every cell
5. **Intestinal health** – is essential to distribute nutrients through the internal digestive environment
6. **Exercise** – muscle contraction encourages oxygenation and cleansing of toxins of biochemical by products
7. **Meditation** – calming alpha brain rhythms has proven to encourage cell restoration and repair

Each of these treatment approaches are interactive and non-sequential. Each one affects another and supports its own progress. As the body achieves a more natural state of functioning, its own repair and restorative mechanisms are more operative and effective.

Karina is a fifty-six year old woman who came to see me for digestive problems. Her doctor had diagnosed her with “colitis”, an inflammatory bowel disease. Her symptoms ranged from pain and intestinal cramping to severe diarrhea. At times it prevented her from leaving her home if she couldn't find a way to settle her symptoms.

Otherwise she was healthy without a significant medical history. She had tried some natural remedies on her own before seeing the specialist who diagnosed her condition. When she asked him if there could be something in her diet that could be making her symptoms worse he said “no, you can eat anything you want.” So she left with only one medical recommendation: a prescription for prednisone, an oral steroid.

The first thing we discussed was her diet. She told me that she noticed certain foods did seem to make it worse, but she hadn't changed anything since her doctor didn't think it would help.

According to the natural physiology of the intestines, if the intestinal lining is inflamed or infected, inflammatory signals will trigger the body to react. It will try to heal itself with protein-like enzymes, but if there is a constant irritant, like certain foods or a pathogen, the repair process will be impaired and the inflammation worsens.

An anti-inflammatory diet was initially suggested to Karina. This is a diet that won't irritate or trigger her intestines to react. The diet eliminates all processed foods that contain food dyes, chemical preservatives and hydrogenated fats. Next the most common food allergens like wheat, gluten, soy, dairy and peanuts are eliminated. These foods are replaced with foods that are anti-inflammatory, like the complete rainbow of colored vegetables and fresh meats that are free of chemicals. Eating only foods that are nourishing and not irritating allows the intestinal tract a rest to restore and repair itself.

The intestines are often called the “second brain.” This is because most of the brain's neuro-chemicals can be found in or influenced by the intestines. They are made from a selection of amino acids. Therefore, in order to treat the gut, these brain messenger neurotransmitters require attention. One of the amino acids, tryptophan, builds serotonin, responsible for the gut motility or its ease of function. Evaluating the combination of amino acids in the diet supports its healthy repair.

To read more: Order the book

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