

# Autoimmune Disorders

Somewhere between 14 and 22 million Americans suffer from autoimmune disorders, according to the National Institutes of Health. The term “autoimmune disorder” describes any condition in which the immune system mistakes healthy body tissue for a foreign invader. This prompts the immune response to attack and destroy the healthy tissue.

More than 80 different types of autoimmune disorders exist. Here are some of the most common:

- Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE)
- Multiple sclerosis (MS)
- Type 1 diabetes
- Thyroid (Graves and Hashimoto)
- Myasthenia gravis Scleroderma
- Rheumatoid arthritis (RA)

Treatment for each of these diseases differs, but one basic tenet remains the same: finding and treating underlying causes or triggers can have a significant impact.

## Contributing Factors

Some of the underlying issues include poor diet, food allergens, infection, toxin exposure, genetic susceptibility, and poor gut health. Increasingly, environmental exposures seem to be contributing to autoimmunity.

Some researchers have named three main underlying factors for autoimmunity: genetic susceptibility, an environmental trigger, and intestinal permeability (“leaky gut”). Because of the gut-related problems, it’s common for people with autoimmune disorders to be deficient in specific nutrients, including:

- Vitamin D
- B12
- Zinc
- Potassium
- Magnesium

These deficiencies can contribute to the progression of the disease and make it harder for the body to heal, so it’s important to identify and treat them. The good news is that once they’re treated, the impact to wellbeing can be immediate.

## Treatment Options

In conventional medicine, care for autoimmune diseases focuses on using drugs to suppress immune activity and to relieve inflammatory symptoms (by shutting down inflammation). With integrative medicine, the main goal is to identify likely causes or contributing factors. Because autoimmune disorders can be very complex, your practitioner may order laboratory tests and will take a detailed history in order to determine potential causes or triggers of your condition. Once those have been identified, you and your healthcare practitioner will work together to address them through diet, lifestyle counseling, dietary supplements and sometimes medications if deemed necessary.

In recent years, thrilling new research has emerged around very early identification of autoimmune risk. By noting the presence of even low levels of antibodies, often years before symptoms emerge, it appears we can address the same underlying factors and reduce or eliminate the risk of developing the full-blown disease. By identifying causes and triggers and fixing them, it’s possible to slow the progress of autoimmune disorders — and, in some cases, even cause remission.