

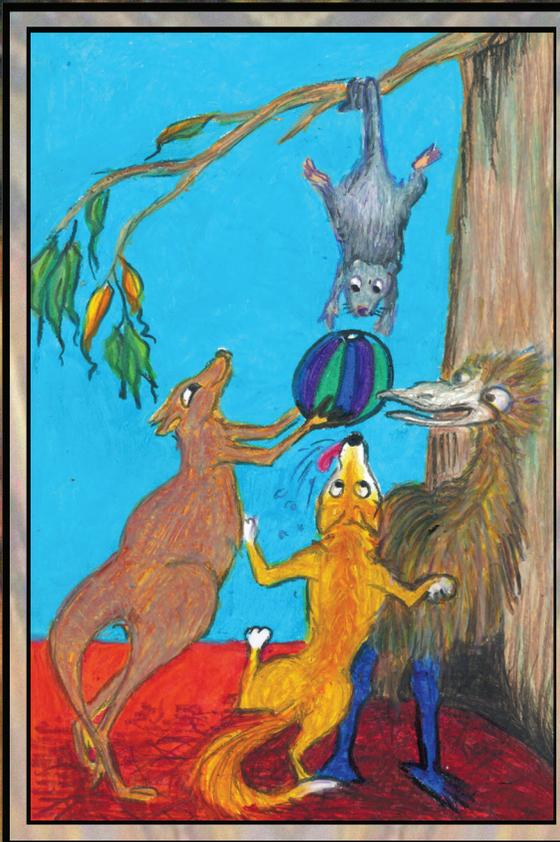
## Things that may be helpful:

Autoimmune illness can be well managed with the help of doctors, medications & some lifestyle changes. It may be helpful to:

- ➡ Learn as much as you can about your illness.
  - ➡ See your doctors regularly to monitor treatments & help you live a healthier life
  - ➡ Always take the drugs prescribed by your doctor.
  - ➡ Protect yourself from the sun & extremes of weather. Put on sunscreen to protect the skin from sun damage. Always wear a hat & sunglasses.
  - ➡ Use lotions to help soothe skin rashes.
  - ➡ Do physical & occupational therapy exercises to help muscles work better & get stronger.
  - ➡ Exercise is good for you as it strengthens muscles & keeps joints flexible. If you are feeling unwell you should reduce your exercise until you feel better.
  - ➡ Tiredness is common so resting is good. Learn to timetable rest times after active times.
  - ➡ Pay attention to your body & slow down especially when you are not feeling well.
  - ➡ Consider seeing a speech therapist to help with swallowing problems.
  - ➡ Seek advice from a dietician to learn about foods that can help you & different ways to prepare foods.
- Your diet should include a variety of foods.
- ➡ Don't eat too many foods that contain high levels of sugars, salt & fats.

➡ Drink adequate fluids, in particular water.

➡ Do stretching exercises daily.



## WHERE CAN I GET HELP?

Autoimmune Resource & Research Centre

Telephone: 02 49214095

email: [arrc@autoimmune.org.au](mailto:arrc@autoimmune.org.au)

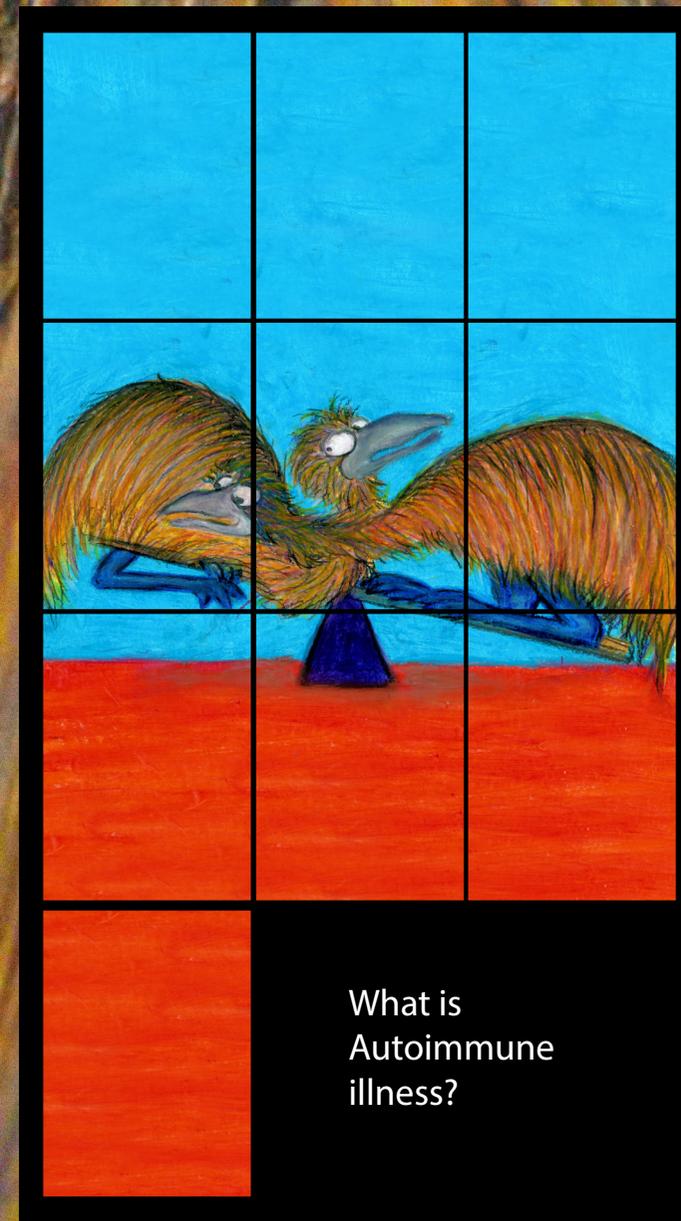
web: [www.autoimmune.org.au](http://www.autoimmune.org.au)

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## Autoimmune illness



What is  
Autoimmune  
illness?

## The immune system

Our body uses the immune system to protect itself from harmful things such as bacteria & viruses. This system has lots of different parts which work together to keep out damaging germs, & to attack & destroy any which manage to get inside your body. This is why you do not get sick every time you are exposed to a germ, & why, when you do get sick, your body's immune system works to fight the germ causing the illness & remembers how to fight the infection if you are exposed to the same germ again.

Simple immune defences in the body can be sneezing, coughing, crying & going to the toilet. The defences work through many parts of the body including:

- ➡ Skin.
- ➡ Eyes through producing tears.
- ➡ Respiratory system through your nose, mouth & lungs.
- ➡ Lymphatic system through your lymph fluid & lymph nodes.
- ➡ Blood circulatory system through your white & red blood cells.



## Autoimmune illness

For some people, the immune system does not work properly & some people may get sick when the system is not balanced & becomes over active. When the immune system is overactive it causes harm to itself by attacking parts of the body as if it was the enemy. The immune system mistakenly begins attacking specific healthy cells & tissues & fails to shut off. This is called autoimmune illness. We are not sure why this happens. Some autoimmune illnesses focus on one type of tissue or organ (organ specific), others cause problems more widely throughout the body (non-organ-specific or systemic).

There is nothing you could have done to stop yourself getting the condition. We also know that you cannot catch the condition from other people or give it to them.

There are lots of different autoimmune illnesses, but examples of some of the more common illnesses are:

### Organ-specific illnesses:

- ➡ Addison's disease (adrenal glands).
- ➡ Coeliac disease (gastrointestinal tract).
- ➡ Crohn's disease (gastrointestinal tract).
- ➡ Multiple sclerosis (brain/spinal cord).
- ➡ Type 1 diabetes (pancreas).
- ➡ Graves disease or Hashimoto's thyroiditis (thyroid gland).
- ➡ Uveitis (eyes).



## Non-organ-specific illnesses:

- ➡ Dermatomyositis (skin, muscles).
- ➡ Lupus (joints, kidneys, skin, heart, brain, others).
- ➡ Scleroderma (skin, joints, intestine & sometimes lungs).
- ➡ Sjögrens syndrome.
- ➡ Uveitis (eyes).
- ➡ Rheumatoid arthritis (joints).



## Who is at risk for autoimmune illnesses?

Risk factors for each illness are not the same however; research shows that there are strong links to:

- ➡ **Gender** – autoimmune illnesses are more likely in females than males, with adolescent girls & young women most at risk.
- ➡ **Age** – young & middle aged people are most likely to be affected. For some illnesses, they always begin in childhood.
- ➡ **Genetics** – you are more at risk if you have a family history of autoimmune illness.

## How are they diagnosed?

Autoimmune illnesses are often hard to diagnose as many of the early symptoms are non-specific & found in many other illnesses. Diagnosis begins with a full physical examination & family history. Blood tests & other imaging tests, such as MRI & ultrasound, may be ordered to allow the doctor to take a closer look at specific organs & tissues. A biopsy, that is taking a tissue sample, may be needed in some cases to help identify the illness.

Illness symptoms can change which means that a diagnosis of a specific autoimmune illness can sometimes take time.

People that have symptoms are often sent to a specialist doctor to help with diagnosis & treatment. They can include:

- ➡ **Immunologist** – looks at the immune system
- ➡ **Dermatologist** – looks at the skin
- ➡ **Rheumatologist** – looks at the joints & muscles
- ➡ **Urologist** – looks at the kidneys
- ➡ **Cardiologist** – looks at the heart
- ➡ **Paediatrician** – looks after children who have illness

The type of specialist you are sent to depends on your symptoms & your treatment can involve many specialists including your family doctor.

## How are they treated?

For most autoimmune illnesses there is no definite cure. There are however treatments available to help reduce symptoms & to 'damp down' the over reaction of the immune system. The treatments keep the immune system from doing further damage to parts of the body. The treatment involves taking medications & making some life adjustments.

### Medications can include:

- ➡ Pain relievers (analgesics).
- ➡ Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).
- ➡ Corticosteroids
- ➡ Disease modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs).
- ➡ Other immune modifying & suppressant drugs. Managing an autoimmune illness can also involve many other health professionals:
- ➡ Health educators to help you understand your illness & management.
- ➡ Physical & occupational therapy to increase joint & muscle movement, & support people with autoimmune illness to continue activities of everyday life.
- ➡ Dietician to help you with understanding food & the best diet,
- ➡ Speech therapy to help with swallowing
- ➡ Psychologist or counsellor can help maintain a positive outlook & to adjust to having a chronic illness.
- ➡ It is also important that you look at your life & make some lifestyle changes that will help support your health & wellbeing.



## What is the outlook?

Most autoimmune illnesses have times when you will feel better & other times when you will have symptom flare up or many symptoms at once. This is not uncommon. For some people, the illness can be mild, whilst for others the symptoms can impact on their life a lot & require a lot of treatment. In some people the illness symptoms appear to go away, in most the symptoms will be able to be treated & well managed. It is difficult to predict how much having autoimmune illness will affect your life. In most cases, having an autoimmune illness does not stop you leading & enjoying your life.

