

Wellness

REVIEW

Autoimmune Conditions - Bringing Back the Balance

What is an autoimmune condition?

Perhaps you or someone you know has been diagnosed with an autoimmune condition. But what does this really mean? 'Auto' is the Latin word for 'self' and 'autoimmune' essentially means that your body mounts an immune response against itself. This is characterised by inflammation and destruction of body tissues by the body's own immune system – commonly experienced as pain, swelling and a wide variety of symptoms depending upon what areas of the body are affected. Some common autoimmune conditions include:

- Rheumatoid arthritis;
- Lupus (SLE);
- Psoriasis;
- Crohn's disease;
- Ulcerative colitis; and
- Hashimoto's thyroiditis.

Why does the body attack itself?

Autoimmune conditions are thought to be the result of an unregulated, therefore *unbalanced* immune system.

The role of your immune system is to protect you from potentially harmful invaders such as bacteria, viruses, toxins and allergens. In response to such invaders, your immune system sends out T cells (your main infection-fighting cells) to help destroy the invading cells. T regulatory cells are special cells that act like traffic controllers – they oversee how many and what type of T cells are released and help keep your immune system in check.

When there is a lack of correctly-functioning T regulatory cells, your immune system cannot tell the difference between invading cells and healthy body tissue, and hence destroys it – causing inflammation, and leading to the common symptoms of pain and fatigue. In addition, inflammation results in further local tissue damage, which can affect the functioning of specific organs. For example, in ulcerative colitis the gut lining is attacked and damaged, resulting in poor digestive function and abdominal pain.

Bacteria for balance

Since the majority of the immune system is housed in the gut, a healthy balance of beneficial microbiota (bacteria) in your digestive system is important for a well regulated immune system. Poor diet, stress and some medications can lead to imbalances in gut bacteria, which is a common feature in people with autoimmune conditions.

Beneficial bacteria, in the form of probiotics, can help re-educate the immune system by restoring the balance of microbes that influence the immune response. The specific probiotic strains *Lactobacillus rhamnosus* GG (LGG®) and

Lactobacillus paracasei (LP-33™) work together to encourage the growth of other beneficial bacteria in the gut; and increase the numbers of T regulatory cells that encourage a healthy immune response, leading to an improvement in symptoms.

For example, the use of probiotics in cases of ulcerative colitis can reduce local gut pain and inflammation, improve digestive function, and ultimately reduce the number of "flare ups" experienced.

Nutritional immune balancers

Never overlook nutrients to help restore immune balance:

- Vitamin D - a fundamental nutrient for autoimmunity, as it is required for the production of healthy T regulatory cells. Correcting vitamin D deficiency can help support an appropriate immune response, thereby reducing the number of symptom 'flare ups'.
- Omega-3 essential fatty acids EPA and DHA - found in fish oils, these act as an 'off' switch to help resolve unchecked inflammation. Fish oils may provide not only symptomatic relief of pain, but can also help reduce inflammation-driven tissue damage; allowing the affected organs to return to normal functioning.



Getting life back on track

There are a number of lifestyle measures you can make to help maintain balanced immune function:

- Diet is key to supporting healthy gut microbiota - eat plenty of whole, unprocessed foods, including wholegrains and fibre, to encourage the growth of beneficial bacteria in your gut.
- Foods high in essential fatty acids such as oily fish, nuts and seeds may help keep inflammation at bay.
- Regular, low-impact exercise not only releases pain-killing endorphins, but also helps combat the fatigue associated with autoimmune conditions.

Speak to your Practitioner today about quality probiotics and nutrients to help you re-establish a healthy immune balance and better manage your autoimmune condition.