

## **Autoimmune Disease** **by Kimberly Mast**

*Published in Rising Women Magazine between 2010 to 2011*

Autoimmune diseases arise from an overactive immune response of the body against substances and tissues normally present in the body. In other words, the body actually attacks its own cells. The immune system mistakes some part of the body as a pathogen and attacks it.

There are more than eighty illnesses caused by autoimmunity. Overall, autoimmune diseases are common, affecting more than 23.5 million Americans, which are often chronic, debilitating, and life-threatening. It has been estimated that autoimmune diseases are among the ten leading causes of death among women in all age groups.

The symptoms of autoimmune disease vary depending on the disease as well as the person's immune system. Common symptoms include: inflammation, fatigue, dizziness, elevated fever and high body temperature, extreme sensitivity to cold in the hands and feet, weakness and stiffness in muscles and joints, weight changes, digestive or gastrointestinal problems, low or high blood pressure, irritability, anxiety, or depression, infertility or reduced sex drive (low libido), blood sugar changes, and depending on the type of autoimmune disease, an increase in the size of an organ or tissue or the destruction of an organ or tissue can result.

Certain events or environmental exposures may cause some autoimmune diseases, or make them worse. Sunlight, chemicals (called solvents), and viral and bacterial infections are linked to many autoimmune diseases.

If you are living with an autoimmune disease, there are things you can do each day to feel better. Autoimmune diseases are often associated with food allergies and abnormal bowel permeability, linking them closely to diet and lifestyle. Certain fats (processed vegetable oils, in particular) stimulate the formation of inflammatory chemicals, while others (the omega-3 fatty acids found in cold-water fish and flaxseed) actually reduce inflammation. The immune system needs a strong nutritional foundation over a long period of time to combat autoimmune diseases.

Rest allows your body tissues and joints the time they need to repair. Sleeping is a great way you can help both your body and mind. If you don't get enough sleep, your stress level and your symptoms could get worse.

Stress and anxiety can trigger symptoms to flare up with some autoimmune diseases. So finding ways to simplify your life and cope with daily stressors will help you to feel your best. Meditation, self-hypnosis, and guided imagery, are simple relaxation techniques that might help you to reduce stress, lessen your pain, and deal with other aspects of living with your disease.