

## Autoimmune Diseases - Fast Facts

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1. Autoimmune diseases are a broad range of more than 80 related disorders that vary from common to rare. They affect around 5% of people and are one of the most significant chronic health problems in Australia and New Zealand.
2. Common autoimmune diseases include thyroiditis, rheumatoid arthritis, and diabetes. Less commonly, they include systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), also known as lupus, and vasculitis disorders (inflammation of the blood vessels).
3. The main role of the immune system is to protect the body from harm caused by bacteria, moulds and viruses. In autoimmune diseases, the immune system attacks the body's own cells, tissues and organs, resulting in inflammation and damage.
4. The causes of autoimmune disease are unknown, however, they are thought to be inherited in many cases. Factors such as infections and some drugs (medications) may also play a role in triggering autoimmune diseases.
5. Localised autoimmune diseases mainly affect a single organ and/or tissue. However, the effects often extend to other body systems and organs.
6. Systemic autoimmune diseases can affect many body organs and tissues at the same time. They include rheumatological disease and vasculitis disorders. These diseases are often managed by clinical immunology/allergy specialists or rheumatologists.
7. Autoimmune diseases are usually diagnosed using a combination of clinical history, blood tests and other investigations such as x-rays. Sometimes a biopsy (when a small sample of affected tissue is taken) may be required for diagnosis.
8. There are a wide range of treatment options, which depend on the stage and type of autoimmune disease. The main aims of treatments are to relieve symptoms, minimise organ and tissue damage and preserve organ function. Treatment options include:
  - Replacement of organ functions (such as insulin in diabetes).
  - Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDs).
  - Corticosteroid anti-inflammatory medications (such as prednisolone).
  - Medications that suppress the immune system (immunosuppressants).
  - Therapeutic monoclonal medications (such as TNF inhibitors).
  - Immunoglobulin replacement therapy (IRT).

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