**Why is Autoimmune Disease on the Rise?**

**By Dr. Ramona Warren**

There is a medical doctor in his 80’s whom I have to privilege to know. He is an interesting man with many stories to tell from his 55 years of working with patients. As we were talking one day, he mentioned, upon his graduation from medical school, there were only about eight known autoimmune diseases. It was a striking statement because today there are between 80-100 identified autoimmune diseases, and possibly another 40 diseases that have an autoimmune component. The American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association estimates 1 in 12 people have an autoimmune disease, with women three times more likely to be diagnosed with autoimmunity than men. It is a sad truth that in less than a lifetime we have seen a dramatic spike in autoimmune illnesses.

Simply stated, an autoimmune disease is when a person’s immune system attacks its own cells causing tissue destruction. Every part of the body can be affected such as the skin, joints, eyes, brain, nerves, lungs, liver and digestive tract. Diseases such as Rheumatoid Arthritis, Celiac Disease, Lupus, Psoriasis and Hashimotos Thyroiditis are examples of autoimmune diseases. “Common” conditions such as Asthma, Arthritis, Gastritis and Irritable Bowel Syndrome are also considered autoimmune diseases.

Although there can be a genetic component involved in autoimmune disease, many experts believe there are also non-genetic triggers that can act as contributing factors. Dr. Frederick Miller of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, believes an individual’s environment plays a significant role. He states: “With the rapid increase in autoimmune diseases, it clearly suggests that environmental factors are at play due to the significant increase in these diseases. Genes do not change in such a short period of time.”

One of these “environmental factors” can be a person’s own digestive system. The majority of a person’s immune function is in the gut. A weakness in digestive ability can lead to an impaired immune response. Decreased stomach acid, low production of pancreatic enzymes, insufficient bile production or bile flow, and/or an imbalance of “good bacteria” in the intestinal track can all lead to a condition known as “Leaky Gut.” With Leaky Gut, the lining of the intestines breaks down and becomes more permeable, allowing non-digested foods and pathogens, such as bacteria, viruses and parasites, to enter the bloodstream. This causes inflammation, which can then trigger an immune response. Patients undergoing conventional medical treatment for autoimmune disease are often given immune- suppressing drugs and steroids, which further upset the gut flora balance and can cause more digestive problems.

Food sensitivities can also often aggravate both the digestive and the immune systems. The most common foods that people show sensitivity to are gluten, dairy, eggs, corn, soy, peanuts, sugar and artificial sweeteners. Many people are finding that simply eliminating gluten can make a tremendous difference in their digestive systems.

Another “environmental factor” that can trigger an autoimmune response is the consumption of genetically modified foods (GMOs). Many studies have shown that GMOs cause inflammation, damage the digestive tract and can lead to an overreaction of the immune system. Unfortunately, it is difficult to know which foods are GMO since there are no government regulations requiring the labeling of GMO food products. To avoid GMO food, buy from local farmers and choose organic as much as possible. You can also go to [www.nongmoproject.org](http://www.nongmoproject.org) to find a list of non-GMO foods.

Research has shown that chemical exposure can also increase a person’s likelihood of developing an autoimmune disease. We are exposed to over 80,000 chemicals in our modern society. There are chemicals in our foods, as well as in our environment. Studies have found that even infant fetal-cord blood contains up to 287 pollutants. Exposure to these chemicals, as well as the poor quality diet consumed by most Americans, puts a tremendous burden on the liver, which acts as a filter and is the main organ of detoxification. The liver becomes “clogged,” making it difficult to properly eliminate toxins, which then leads to poor immune function. Doing a cleanse or “detox” once or twice a year is important in improving immune system function and overall health. This is one reason I personally do a cleanse twice a year and guide others in proper detoxification methods with great results.

By paying attention to these environmental factors, you can help decrease your risk of developing an autoimmune condition. If you already have an autoimmune disease, eliminating these triggers can help ease your symptoms and possibly result in dramatic improvements.