

What Category Is Your Autoimmune Condition?

A practical guide from Dr. Nicola Schmitz

Why This Helps

There are more than one hundred autoimmune conditions, and the list keeps growing. They look completely different on the surface. One person has stiff, swollen joints. Another is exhausted and cold all the time. Another has patches on their skin. It feels like these have nothing to do with each other. But underneath, they share one mechanism. The immune system has started attacking the body's own tissue, because it mistook that tissue for a threat. What changes from condition to condition is mostly which tissue is in the line of fire.

Knowing which tissue your own condition targets makes the rest of this season easier to follow, because everything we cover, the gut, blood sugar, the liver, the nervous system, nutrients, and environment, feeds into the same immune system that is currently aiming at that tissue.

How To Read This

Conditions below are grouped by the tissue they affect. For each one you will find what it targets and what that means day to day. This is an educational overview, not a diagnosis. If you recognize yourself here, it is a starting point for a better conversation with your doctor, not a replacement for one.

GLANDS AND HORMONES

Hashimoto's thyroiditis. The immune system attacks the thyroid, the small gland in your neck that sets the pace of your whole metabolism. As the gland is worn down, it makes less hormone, so everything slows. Fatigue, cold hands, weight that will not move, brain fog, low mood. The most common autoimmune condition of all.

Graves' disease. The mirror image. Here the immune system pushes the thyroid into overdrive, so everything speeds up. Racing heart, weight loss, anxiety, heat intolerance, trouble sleeping.

Type 1 diabetes. The immune system destroys the cells in the pancreas that make insulin, the hormone that lets your cells take in sugar. Without it, blood sugar climbs and the body cannot use its own fuel.

JOINTS AND CONNECTIVE TISSUE

Rheumatoid arthritis. The immune system attacks the lining of the joints, which become swollen, hot, and painful, classically worse in the morning. Over time the joint itself can be damaged. Unlike ordinary wear-and-tear arthritis, this is an active immune attack.

Lupus. One of the broadest conditions, because it can target many tissues at once, skin, joints, kidneys, blood vessels. This is why it is hard to diagnose and why symptoms can seem to wander around the body.

Psoriatic arthritis. Joint inflammation that travels alongside the skin condition psoriasis, so a person may have both painful joints and skin patches.

THE GUT

Celiac disease. The immune system reacts to gluten and, in doing so, damages the lining of the small intestine where nutrients are absorbed. This is a clear example of the food-mistaken-for-an-enemy mechanism we discussed in the episode.

Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. Two forms of inflammatory bowel disease, where the immune system attacks the wall of the digestive tract itself, causing inflammation, pain, and disrupted digestion.

SKIN

Psoriasis. The immune system speeds up skin cell turnover dramatically, so cells pile up faster than they can shed, forming raised, scaly patches.

Vitiligo. The immune system targets the cells that give skin its color, leaving pale patches where the pigment is gone.

NERVES

Multiple sclerosis. The immune system attacks the protective coating around nerves, the insulation that lets signals travel cleanly. As that coating is damaged, the messages between brain and body get scrambled, which is why symptoms can range so widely from numbness to vision changes to fatigue.

The Common Thread

However different these look, the underlying story is the same. A protective system, doing what it is built to do, has been pointed at the wrong target. The tissue it hits decides what you feel, but the reason it is attacking at all comes back to the conditions inside the body. That is the part you can work with, and it is what the rest of this season is about.

From Alter Health: The Epigenetic Code. New episodes every Tuesday. Dr. Nicola Schmitz