

AutoImmune Syndromes: The Ultimate Immune Confusion

November 2008



Michael Cheikin MD
Holistic Medicine and Psychiatry

610-239-8626 www.cheikin.com

The term "auto-immune syndrome" ("AIS") says it all--the immune system attacks the body itself. While there is a growing list (see the table) and lots of overlap, all of these conditions, at least from the holistic point of view, spin off the same center. While they are called "diseases", they are really "syndromes" since we truly don't know the cause in most cases.

AIS is the immune system's version of lemmings walking off a cliff--the body begins to destroy itself. (A similar, and related condition, cancer, also involves the immune system, where it stands by while it watches rogue cells take over--this will be discussed in a future article).

The Western Explanation

Science explains that in AIS the immune system is taught to recognize certain bad "bio-markers" (proteins or other components of cells) that identify their carrier (bacteria, virus, etc.) as evil. The immune system then attacks the carrier of this marker. The bio-markers of certain viruses and other agents have signatures that are similar to normal body tissues. The immune system then begins to attack these tissues, causing illness. For example, in Multiple Sclerosis, the tissue that is attacked is the myelin that coats the nerve cells in the brain. This causes a secondary inflammatory reaction, with swelling and local tissue destruction.

Western Treatment

Once the immune system enters this confused state, conventional medicine has limited treatment options--to suppress or to kill the immune system, or to remove the tissue that is being attacked (such as in Graves disease, where the thyroid gland is destroyed or surgically removed). These treatments, using powerful, chronic drugs such as cortisone, or methotrexate, have serious side-effects, including tendency toward infections, weakening of bone and skin, damage to fast-growing tissue such as the skin and gut lining, and diabetes. Even the newer immune-modulating treatments such as Enbrel has serious potential side effects.

Facts About Auto-Immune Diseases

- 1) Having one AIS pre-disposes to a second;
- 2) There is a genetic/family pre-disposition to AIS's;
- 3) Rheumatoid arthritis (and other AIS's) improves during a fast

- 4) If people with Ulcerative Colitis or Crohns Disease (auto-immune bowel diseases) are fed bacteria from healthy people, they have improvement equal to that of medication;
- 5) Vitamin D deficiency increases the risk of developing AIS's;
- 6) The adrenal hormone, cortisone, or its derivative, is the main drugs used for most AIS's

Holistic Treatment

Putting these interesting clues together, holistic medicine figured out how to slow down, or even reverse AIS. At the center of these syndromes is the confusion and over-reactivity of the immune system. It is possible to naturally calm down, and sometimes re-program the immune system.

The Gut-Immune

Connection. When thinking about the immune system, the first place to look is the gut. While too complex to discuss in detail (see prior articles on Leaky Gut Syndrome and others), up to 80% of the immune system resides around the gut, monitoring the trillions of bacteria and yeast that naturally live there. When this farm goes awry, the gut leaks toxins and harmful agents into the body, causing toxicity and biochemical stress, igniting the immune system and also impairing neurological function. Situations that can cause gut dysfunction, even without any symptoms include: chronic constipation, GERD, chronic use of acid-blocking medicines, NSAID's, birth control pills, recurrent yeast and other

infections, antibiotics, conventional diet lacking good nutrients and foods with known toxins such as mercury (fish) and pesticides (conventional produce, tea, coffee).

Allergy to specific foods, especially dairy, wheat, gluten, soy and nightshades (tomatoes, eggplant, white potatoes) can act as a toxin or irritant and cause sufficient gut inflammation to instigate or perpetuate any AIS. Testing for food allergy remains controversial as many tests give variable false positive and false negative results. A comprehensive elimination/detox diet, under professional guidance is always advised as part of the evaluation and treatment program. In some cases, food allergy by itself can be a predominant causal factor.

Adrenal Balance. The adrenal glands are the shock absorbers of the body (see article on Adrenal Fatigue).

Common Auto-Immune Diseases*		
Condition	Tissue Involved	Major Symptoms
Addison's Disease	Adrenal Glands	Weakness, low blood pressure,
Alopecia areata	Hair	Loss of hair in patches
Ankylosing Spondylitis	Tendons	Stiffness and pain in spine, other joints
Celiac Disease	Gut lining	Diarrrhea, malnutrition, pain
Crohn's Disease	Colon	Blood, pain, malabsorption
Diabetes Type I	Pancreas (beta cells)	High blood sugar, poor immune function, narrowing of blood vessels to kidneys, heart, legs, eyes
Guillian Barre	Peripheral nerves (arms, legs, face, lungs)	Weakness, paralysis
Grave's Disease	Thyroid hormone receptor	Hyper-thyroidism: fatigue, weight loss, irritability, bulging eyes, hyper-calcemia
Hashimoto's Thyroiditis	Thyroid gland	Hypo-thyroidism: fatigue, weight gain, high cholesterol, poor immune function
Idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura ("ITP")	Platelets	Bleeding
Lupus	Blood vessels	Impaired function of brain, kidneys, joint pain
Multiple Sclerosis	Nerve myelin (covering of nerve cells)	Neurological: impaired vision, balance, coordination, cognition
Myasthenia Gravis	Muscle receptors	Weakness, droopy eyes,
Polymyositis	Muscles	Pain, stiffness, weakness, fatigue
Psoriasis	Skin, Joints, Other	Rashes, Joint Swelling, Pain
Rheumatoid Arthritis	Joint synovium (lining)	Joint swelling, stiffness, destruction, fatigue
Sjogren's Syndrome	Salivary and tear glands	Dryness of eyes, mouth
Temporal Arteritis	Arteries of head	Sudden blindness, pain, fatigue
Ulcerative Colitis	Colon (lower bowel)	Blood in stool, malabsorption, fatigue
Vitiligo	Skin pigment (melanocytes)	Loss of skin and hair pigment

* a more complete list is available at www.cheikin.com (Free Articles)

When stress, either physical, physiological, or psycho-emotional, becomes chronic, these glands cannot keep up production of important stress-modulating hormones including cortisol, DHEA and pregnenolone. The job of these hormones is at times to stoke the immune system, and at other times to suppress it. Most holistic physicians agree that an imbalance between cortisol and DHEA enables the immune system to become confused. It is no surprise that the mainstay of treatment for most AIS's is the use of cortisone. However, rather than using these hormones medically in very high doses, by working to reduce stress (good sleep, yoga, simplification, psycho-spiritual exploration), and giving these glands gentle support through diet, proper supplementation, and detoxification the body can un-wind out of adrenal fatigue.

Holistic treatment of AIS should always include diagnostic tests looking for factors and/or toxins that enable such confusion. These include vitamin and mineral deficiency, fatty acid imbalance, heavy metal toxicity, dysbiosis (imbalanced bacteria and yeast in the gut), parasites, petroleum-based toxins, mold toxins (from a home), genetically based biochemical dysfunctions, halide imbalance (see prior article on Thyroid Dysfunction), and in some cases, even more exoteric energy testing. While some of these tests are controversial and not "covered" by insurance, given the value of discovering a hidden causal factor, they are worth the investment if amortized over the value of a lifetime.

Three important supplements are omega-3 fish oils, omega-6 gamma-linoleic acid and vitamin D. They are well established natural re-balancers of the immune system. However, they must be supported by other nutrients such as anti-oxidants and should not be taken in isolation. Blood tests should guide dosage, because absorption varies and too much, too little, or the wrong ratio can limit results or cause toxicity.

Psycho-Spiritual Energetic Realm

While this realm evokes skepticism and controversy, true healing of AIS requires exploration of the psycho-spiritual-energetic nature of these conditions. Since AIS's are serious and dangerous, treatments that are uncomfortable or unconventional, as long as not dangerous, should be considered.

It cannot be disputed that in AIS, the body attacks itself. Even if there is a clear genetic disposition, most people are not born with AIS, but develop it. (Twin studies have demonstrated that only 20-30% of disease is genetically hard-wired, therefore most illness involves an environmental or lifestyle component). Past physical or psycho-emotional traumas can block energy flow, enabling more serious imbalances to follow. Themes of guilt, regret, anger, hatred, or simple unhappiness with current relationship or job need to be explored to make sure that they are not contributing to the web of causal factors.

Energy treatments such as acupuncture, body work (such as massage, Reiki and zero balancing) homeopathy, and more modern techniques such as NAET, NET, and NMT can be an effective component of the healing process. In addition, psychotherapy, journaling, hypnosis, and in

some cases, more esoteric treatment such as shamanism or past life regression might be necessary.

Life is a mystery. Regardless of the commercials that try to make us passive recipients of life, by self-empowerment and taking an honest assessment of the multi-dimensional nature of our lives, healing of serious conditions such as AIS's is a true possibility for most seekers.

IMPORTANT NOTE: This general information should not be used to make decisions about medical care without the involvement of an experienced practitioner.

For More Information

- O See Dr. Cheikin's related articles on: Leaky Gut Syndrome, Adrenal Fatigue, Gut & Inflammation, Detoxification and others
- O Dr. Cheikin's website, www.cheikin.com, has more information
- O Dr. Cheikin offers workshops in several holistic health topics. Please call for more information or to host a Workshop.
- O Cheikin, Michael: Chronic Pain, Fibromyalgia and Chronic Fatigue Syndromes: A Nine Step Pathway for Healing. Optimal Health, 2007. ISBN-13. 9780-9795-20303.
- O Ballentine, Rudolph: Radical Healing: Integrating the World's Greatest Therapeutic Traditions... Three Rivers Press, 2000. 0609-804-847
- O Kellman, R et al: Gut Reactions: A Radical New 4-Step Program for Treating Chronic Stomach Distress... NY: Broadway, 2002. ISBN 0767-907-361.
- O Wright, Jonathan: Why Stomach Acid is Good for You. M. Evans and Company, Inc. , 2001. 0871-319-314.
- O Campbell, TC et al: China Study: The Most Comprehensive Study of Nutrition Ever Conducted and the Implications for Diet, Weight Loss... Benbella, 2005. 1932-100-385.
- O Bland, Jeffrey: The 20-Day Rejuvenation Diet Program. Los Angeles: Keats, 1999. ISBN 0879-839-805.
- O Boutenko Victoria: 12 Steps to Raw Foods, Revised Edition. North Atlantic Books, 2007. 1556-436-513.
- O Gittleman, AL: Fast Track Detox Diet: Boost metabolism, rid toxins, jump-start weight loss... Morgan, 2006. 0767-920-465.
- O Pollan, Michael: The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals. New York: Penguin, 2006. 9781-5942-00823.
- O Pizzorno, Joseph: Total Wellness: Improve Your Health by Understanding... Prima, 1997, ISBN 0761-510-94X.
- O Sivananda Center: The Sivananda Companion to Yoga. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983. ISBN: 0684-87000-2.

The contents of this article are copyright 2008 by Michael Cheikin MD and may not be reproduced without express written permission.

Michael Cheikin MD is a holistic physician, Board Certified in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation ("Physiatry"), Pain Management, Spinal Cord Medicine and Electrodiagnostic Medicine and licensed in Medical Acupuncture. He provides leadership to several medical institutions. Dr. Cheikin has extensively studied yoga, diet and metabolism, Ayurvedic, Chinese and energy medicine and other alternative modalities for over 30 years. He designs balanced, natural, individualized health programs for his patients utilizing a combination of education and counseling, medical yoga, whole foods and supplements, and medical acupuncture. He also uses special laboratory tests and diet plans for his patients with obscure, chronic and severe problems who have not responded satisfactorily to other methods of healing. He accepts most insurance plans for consultation by adults and children. 610-239-8626 or www.cheikin.com