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Understanding Autoimmunity:

What Starts It, What Sustains It, and What You Can Do to Support Your Body

A practical guide to the foundations of immune balance and how to make a difference.



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Introduction: Why Autoimmunity Feels So Confusing

Autoimmune conditions often feel mysterious. Symptoms appear, disappear, shift, or multiply. You may feel like your body is attacking itself for no clear reason.

But autoimmunity doesn't begin with the immune system "going rogue." It begins with something much more basic: **the way your body handles old, damaged, or stressed cells.**

When we understand what starts the process, we can finally understand what helps calm it.

I want to give you that clarity. And offer some practical steps you can begin at home.

Part 1: Your Body's Daily Cleanup System

Every single day, your body retires billions of old or worn-out cells. While it's a somewhat complex process, this is normal, healthy, and essential.

When everything is working well, this process is clean and orderly:

- The body recognizes dysfunction within itself and sends a message to the damaged cell to cease function
- The old or damaged cell breaks itself down in a controlled way.
- The body's cleanup crew, composed of specialized immune cells, packages the debris and carries it away.

There is no inflammation, no confusion, and no immune overreaction. It's purely maintenance, like in any system. Worn out or broken parts must be replaced. This is essential for healing and for foundational health. It is the design for life.

When the Cleanup Process Breaks Down

Trouble begins when a cell can't break down cleanly. Something disrupts the cell and/or the signalling process, causing damage. Instead of neatly dismantling itself, the cell swells, weakens, and eventually **bursts**.

When that happens, the inside of the cell spills into the surrounding tissue. DNA fragments, proteins, and other materials that absolutely do not belong outside the cell are now in the fluid between tissues, eventually finding their way into the bloodstream to be carried further. Many of the pieces carry the blueprint of the particular tissue the cell was part of and are designed to replicate. If loose DNA fragments are floating through the bloodstream, random growth where it doesn't belong is very possible.

Your immune system correctly sees this as a threat and responds accordingly.

This is the earliest stage of autoimmune stress.

Part 2: Why the Immune System Gets Confused

When cell debris ends up in the bloodstream or tissues, the immune system must respond. It's trying to protect you, but it's confused.

The challenge is that **the debris came from your own cells.**

Let me give you an example. One of the most widespread thyroid-disrupting chemicals found in everyday homes is BPA (bisphenol A). It shows up in clear plastic bottles, food-can linings, water dispensers, and plastic wraps. As these materials age and break down, they release tiny particles—often called microplastics—that can interfere with thyroid function and hormone balance throughout the body. Because these hormones help regulate metabolism, energy production, and overall cellular rhythm, even small disruptions can have a noticeable impact.

Microplastics poison the cells of the thyroid gland. Inflammation builds in an attempt to shield and repair the them, and the gland as a whole begins swelling. This inflammation makes them less resilient and blunts the signals that normally guide healthy, orderly turnover. Instead of a clean breakdown and replacement, you get messy cell rupture of thyroid cells. Some of these get carried elsewhere in the body where they are a strange mix of debris that is foreign and yet self that the immune system must scramble to clean up.

See how it might get confused whether to attack the invader or just clean up waste?

Another common offender is the type of flame retardants found in upholstered furniture, mattresses, pillows, and certain textiles. Over time, these chemicals can leach into household dust. Because the thyroid sits right on the windpipe, wrapping around the back of the Adam's apple, it's especially vulnerable to airborne particles you inhale day after day. An explosion of thyroid cells there might be inhaled into the lungs.

As exposures accumulate, whether from one concentrated source or several smaller ones layered together, the immune system can slip into a pattern of hyper-vigilance. What begins as a simple cleanup job of removing stray pieces of thyroid tissue that have broken loose under stress slowly shifts into attacking anything identifiable as thyroid. It eventually becomes an attack on the thyroid itself.

Your body is trying to contain a mess, prevent damaged material from causing harm, and keep surrounding tissues safe. It's not randomly going rogue.

Autoimmunity is not betrayal. It's overwhelm..

Part 3: Why This Is So Common Today

A century ago, the average person encountered only a fraction of the chemical and lifestyle stressors we face today. Now we move through a world filled with tens of thousands of synthetic chemicals, processed and chemically altered foods, pesticides, plastics, pollutants, chronic stress, poor sleep, and constant stimulation. Layered together, these exposures place a steady strain on the body's cleanup systems.

At this point, your immune system goes into one of two options, neither of which is helpful: hypervigilance, where allergies and food sensitivities begin appearing, or giving up. This is when something like a common cold just will not go away. The immune system doesn't have the strength or motivation to fight the offenders or carry off the debris. Either way, the cells are stressed and inflamed and continue to burst, furthering the overwhelm. It's not able to resolve the problem.

This is key to understanding autoimmunity and why it's happening.

Part 4: What You Can Do at Home to Support Your Body

You cannot control every exposure. But you *can* support the systems that keep your body balanced.

Here are the foundational strategies that make the biggest difference:

1. Choose Whole, Unprocessed Foods

Whole foods contain complete nutrient complexes that your body knows how to use. The more of them you have, and the more variety of them you eat, the more support your body has to work with.

Supplements can fill in dietary gaps and are a good thing here, but only when your body can use them. Supplements containing isolated chemicals are nothing more than drugs.

Vitamin C is a great example. Whole-food vitamin C like you'd find in citrus, peppers, and berries comes complete with the full complex of cofactors your body uses to process and clear a toxic exposure. Synthetic ascorbic acid, on the other hand, doesn't support that cleanup. It mainly shifts the pH enough to calm inflammation. The symptoms ease, so it looks like the problem is solved, but it also quiets your body's attempt to contain the toxin so it could be safely removed.

*“Each plant part, each fruit and vegetable, has its own characteristic cluster of antioxidants. And each kind of antioxidant generally protects against a certain kind of molecular damage, or helps regenerate certain other protective molecules. No single molecule can protect against all kinds of damage. Unusually high concentrations of single types can actually tip the balance the wrong way and **cause** damage. So the best way to reap the full benefits of the antioxidant powers of plants is not to take*

manufactured supplements of a few prominent chemicals; it is to eat lots of different vegetables and fruits.” - On Food and Cooking, by Harold McGee, p. 257

Did you catch that? Ascorbic acid is just one isolated antioxidant.

If your supplement has chemical names and measurements on the label, those are not nutrients. There are no ingredient labels in the produce section for a reason. Strawberries don't have a set number of milligrams of Vitamin C, potassium and fiber per berry. Whole food varies by season, location, and many other factors. This is why buying organic foods is best: it maximizes nature's blend of soil, sunlight, and water and minimizes synthetic and toxic exposures of the plant or food source itself to make food your body can use. Real food contains nutrients in forms your body can use. If the goal is to fill gaps in the diet, your supplement should have foods on the label.

Whole foods work with the body's natural cleanup processes instead of interrupting them.

2. Reduce Unnecessary Chemical Exposure

We're exposed to things every day. It's unavoidable for the most part, so don't expect perfection here. The goal is just to minimize stressors and strengthen the systems that detoxify your body. This means:

- Choosing organic when possible
- Avoiding synthetic fragrances in laundry products and elsewhere
- Using glass or stainless steel instead of plastic
- Filtering drinking water
- Reducing processed foods

Do what you can in the situation you're in, as you think of it. Don't stress over it. Remember that every small reduction helps lighten the load.

A few years ago, there was a push for antibacterial soaps to stop the spread of disease through public spaces. All of a sudden, mothers were carrying hand sanitizer for their toddlers and themselves. Gas station bathrooms changed out their cheap soap dispensers to clean new ones advertising liquids that contained triclosan or melaleuca. Nobody knew what that meant, but they'd been convinced it would stop germs on contact. Except the body needs bacteria. It is good bacteria on your hands that neutralize harmful pathogens and keep you well. This culture-wide change did more harm than good as it removed the good with the bad and exposed us to harmful chemicals in the process. It also had the added effect of drying out our hands with alcohol. Without a moisture barrier and the beneficial microcolonies on our skin, we were left defenseless when real pathogens appeared.

This is why I emphasize: Don't stress about it. It's too easy to fall off the other side and go too far. Your body is pretty resilient by design. Plain soap and water is sufficient to wash off anything you might've come in contact with. A medical doctor I went to school with won an award several

years ago for his study on this, 150+ years after Ignaz Semmelweis discovered that handwashing slowed disease transmission in the 1840s. No joke. I truly respect my friend as a doctor and was thrilled he brought this back to the fore of healthcare.

A struggle for women, especially, is that we like cosmetics and perfume. Do your best with cosmetics if you wear them; there's no judgment from me. Ingredient lists are difficult to navigate and constantly change. Use natural products where you can and don't worry about the rest unless it is still a problem. I use pure castile soaps and Vitamin E or natural oils like olive or coconut as moisturizers.

Perfumes are another issue. If I didn't get a headache while wearing fragrances, my daughters did. I tried using essential oils for a while, but they don't last well and they have their own therapeutic effects I didn't necessarily want. It was frustrating. My daughter, who is very sensitive to chemicals of all sorts, found a line of EWG certified fragrances for men and women from [Henry Rose](#). This is the ultimate luxury in my mind. I didn't have to take yet another thing away in order to be healthy. I could actually add something in that made me feel beautiful and did not contribute to my toxic load. Remember, too, that anything that lowers stress supports your system.

3. Support Digestion and Detox Pathways

One of the first things to think of before beginning any detox program is if the channels of elimination are open. You can get very sick by releasing stored toxins from your tissues without having open channels to get rid of them. This is similar to drilling holes in the bottom of a flowerpot. Your flower will thrive outside in the sunshine with good soil and regular water. But if there are no drainage holes, it will drown in its own waste.

Your body is no different. It clears debris through:

- The bowels
- The urine
- The liver
- The skin
- The lungs

Supporting these pathways can make a noticeable difference. Gentle strategies include:

- Hydration – water cleans the inside just as well as the outside
- Fiber-rich foods – like a broom, sweeping away dirt
- Movement – this pumps waste out of areas where blood flow isn't present
- Deep breathing – fully clearing the lungs and exhaling toxins
- Sweating – like breathing, this is a primary way of flushing waste
- Adequate minerals – facilitate hydration, buffer and protect your body from toxic substances

These are simple, foundational, and powerful tools that anyone can use. One thing that's often not thought of in this arena is the impact of air conditioning. If you keep yourself in cool, protected environments always, your body won't sweat. It seems very civilized to not get sweaty, but it actually allows toxins that only exit via the skin to build up. Exercising outdoors is a must for promoting wellness.

I recommend Celtic Sea Salt to taste on your food to ensure you have plenty of minerals. Minerals are the building blocks of every tissue and function in the body. Drink lots of water to ensure those minerals become the electrolytes your body needs and can carry them to everywhere they need to be. Eat a wide variety of whole foods. Get outside and walk, run, play pickleball, or whatever you like to do that is fun and sweaty and causes you to breathe deeply. Drink some more water. Then take the time to rest so your body can do the cleanup and repairs that can only be done when you sleep.

4. Manage Stress in a Realistic, Sustainable Way

Stress is the slow killer of women. Yes, it also causes heart attacks in men.

Women's bodies thrive on safety. Chronic stress keeps cortisol elevated in the system, which limits digestion and the ability to sleep, stimulates insulin activity and sugar cravings and puts a damper on the part of your nervous system that controls immunity. And we just thought it made us snappy around the kids.

Don't worry about developing an elaborate routine. Complication makes it easier to fail and then get stressed about the failure. Most women have stress reactions around bathroom scales for this reason. It represents dietary failure to them. Simple consistency breeds a sense of safety in accomplishment, so routine daily practices are best:

- Start each day with prayer. I'm very serious about this. Enlist help from the only one who can actually heal your body.
- Morning sunlight is foundational to health. Sunlight in general. If you live where sunlight is optional, invest in a therapeutic red light and spend 20 minutes with it daily.
- Walking. You don't have to walk far or fast; just do it, outside if possible.
- Quiet times. Your body heals when at rest. **Restful sleep is a crucial part of healing.**
- Say no when you need to.

Regulating daylight, movement, and sleep creates the physiological conditions your body needs to manage inflammation and autoimmune activity more effectively. The rhythm of sunrise and sunset is instructional. Morning light prepares your body for movement and engagement, while evening light prepares it for rest and repair. Just as regular sleep restores your capacity to work, consistent daylight exposure restores your capacity to rest well.

When you watch the sunrise or take a walk early in the day, you are signaling to your nervous system that it is time to be alert and active. As the day progresses and light shifts to the west,

your body begins shifting toward restoration. This predictable rhythm of light, movement, nourishment, work and then evening wind-down reassures your system that it is safe to follow its natural design.

That sense of safety matters. The willingness to pause, to say no when needed, and to honor fatigue helps settle the nervous system and guide you into the calm, repair-oriented state where detoxification, digestion, and immune recalibration work best. In many ways, these simple daily cues tell your body, *You're safe enough to heal*. And that message often matters more than intensity or perfection.

At night, the body naturally moves into deeper restoration. Digestion and assimilation can only happen when the nervous system moves into Rest Mode. The organs of detoxification shift into gear, cellular repair increases, and the brain and immune system reset their signaling patterns. When this rhythm is supported consistently, you may begin to notice steadier energy, clearer thinking, and fewer inflammatory flares.

Targeted nutritional support can gently “move the needle” by supplying the raw materials your body needs for these nighttime repair processes to run smoothly. Once the body is able to accomplish its tasks, you wake with greater resilience for the day ahead.

Remember, small shifts matter. Your body responds to what you do most of the time far more than what you do perfectly.

Part 5: What Healing Realistically Looks Like

If autoimmune issues have been part of your life for years, it's unrealistic to expect a quick turnaround. Patterns of autoimmunity develop over years. They calm down in the same way: slowly, steadily, and with proper support. There will be ups and downs.

But improvement *is* possible. Inflammation can calm. Flares can become less frequent. Energy can return and the body can regain stability.

Read that last section again. You need to realize that these things are possible and will happen with the right support. You were designed to live in a broken world and show what immortality looks like. Healing is part of the design.

It's a steady process of cumulative steps. Much like how you accomplish any big goal by mapping out smaller ones and daily accomplishing those, make sure you recognize the small strides. Sleeping through the night or making it through an afternoon without a nap are big milestones, even if nobody else thinks so. In the world of autoimmunity, fatigue is a marker of how hard your body is working. When you sleep well, that means you're healing. When you have energy to go the distance, that means you're getting stronger.

Healing is also deeply personal. Many autoimmune illnesses have something emotional at their core. It's not unusual to find that symptoms began appearing after a divorce, or an unexpected move. A car accident, maybe. You may find, as you make strides toward healing, that emotions surface that seem out of proportion to whatever triggered them.

As Bessel Van der Kolk talks about in *The Body Keeps the Score*, your body stores emotions as vibration in various organs. Traumatic events or more minor things that are never processed appropriately can begin to show up as symptoms because the proper operating frequency has been disturbed. Grief, for instance, is often suppressed or hurried through because our culture doesn't like to think about death. We're supposed to just get over it or think positively.

When we're under stress or feel our emotions won't be welcomed by the people around us, we often swallow them. That bracing in the throat and chest creates real, physical tension, adding yet another layer of strain. Emotions that don't get a clear outlet don't simply disappear; grief, in particular, has a way of resurfacing through the lungs as a cough, tightness, or bronchial irritation. If this shows up even while you're making good progress, it isn't a setback. It's your body clearing what it finally feels safe to release. Give yourself space to get sick because it's often a signal of deeper healing.

Support can come in many ways just like obstacles to healing, and they are unique to each person. Friendship and love trigger neurotransmitters that encourage systemic healing. They are often overlooked as key to healthy progress.

Conclusion: You Don't Have to Navigate This Alone

Understanding what starts autoimmune patterns is the first step.

Supporting your body with simple, foundational strategies is the second.

If you'd like guidance tailored to your own health story, I offer a complimentary [Discovery Call](#). This is just a conversation with no pressure, just 20 minutes to explore what support might look like for you. It's an opportunity to see if we want to work together.

You deserve clarity and support. Your body deserves the chance to find its way back to balance.

Let's talk!

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