Fast Facts - Autoimmune diseases

1. Autoimmune diseases are a broad range of more than 80 related disorders that range from common to rare. They affect around 5% of people and are one of the most important chronic health problems in Australia and New Zealand. Common autoimmune diseases such as thyroiditis, rheumatoid arthritis and diabetes affect more than 1% of people. Lupus (SLE) affects less than 0.1% of people and is more common and severe in Indigenous Australians, Polynesians and people descended from South East Asia.

2. In autoimmune diseases the immune system produces an inappropriate response against its own cells, tissues and/or organs, resulting in inflammation and damage. This can be localised to a single organ in the body or generalised (systemic), affecting many organs and tissues in the body. Whilst the tendency for autoimmunity may be inherited in some people, factors such as infections and some drugs can play a role in triggering autoimmune diseases.

3. Localised (organ specific) autoimmune diseases mainly affect a single organ and/or tissue. However, the effects frequently extend to other body systems and organs. These diseases are often managed by organ-specific medical specialists, such as endocrinologists, gastroenterologists, neurologists or rheumatologists.

4. Systemic autoimmune diseases can affect many body organs and tissues at the same time. They can be broadly classified into rheumatological disease and vasculitis disorders (inflammation of blood vessels). These diseases are often managed by clinical immunology/allergy specialists and/or rheumatologists.

5. Autoimmune diseases are usually diagnosed using a combination of clinical history, blood tests (autoantibodies, inflammation, organ function) and other investigations such as x-rays. Sometimes a biopsy of affected tissues may be required for diagnosis.

6. There is 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 end organ functions (such as insulin in diabetes)
   - Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDS)
   - Corticosteroid anti-inflammatory medications (such as Prednisolone)
   - Immunosuppressive medications
   - Therapeutic monoclonals (such as TNF inhibitors)
   - Immunoglobulin replacement therapy (IRT)

For more information visit www.allergy.org.au/patients/autoimmunity

There are several patient support organisations for autoimmune disorders that offer information and support. Some of these are listed on the ASCIA website www.allergy.org.au/patients/patient-support-organisations

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