



HEALTH AWARENESS

Could Your Body's Defense Be On The Offense?

(NAPSA)—The body's defense—the immune system. People trust it to keep them healthy and protect them from the germs and bacteria they encounter every day. But sometimes, the immune system doesn't function the way it should. In a class of diseases known as autoimmune diseases, the immune system loses its ability to distinguish between "self" and "nonself," meaning it mistakes the body's own cells as foreign and, accordingly, attacks them. Many conditions are classified as autoimmune diseases. One that we often hear about is rheumatoid arthritis. There are others that we tend to hear less about, such as a disease known as Sjögren's (SHOW-grins) syndrome, which can cause dryness.

Sjögren's syndrome is a chronic autoimmune disease characterized mainly by dry mouth and dry eye symptoms. In Sjögren's syndrome, a certain type of immune system cell destroys the cells of the body's moisture-producing glands—especially those that produce saliva and tears. Other moisture-producing areas of the body may also be affected, including the skin, sinuses, upper airways, and vaginal tissues. Many people who suffer from other autoimmune diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis and systemic lupus erythematosus, also have Sjögren's syndrome and experience the dryness symptoms associated with it.

More than 90 percent of Sjögren's syndrome sufferers are women with an average age of 50 years. It is estimated that this disease affects one million to four million people in the United



States alone. An exact prevalence figure is difficult to determine because many cases of Sjögren's syndrome go undiagnosed. In some cases, diagnosis may take up to 10 years.

In order to prevent damage to the teeth and eyes, it is important to diagnose Sjögren's syndrome early. Therefore, pay close attention to dryness symptoms and be aware of other signs of Sjögren's syndrome, which may include:

- Dry mouth
 - Difficulty chewing, swallowing and speaking
 - Tooth decay, oral sores
- Dry eyes
 - Gritty/sandy feeling in the eye
 - Sensitivity to bright light
- Dryness of the skin, nose

An accurate diagnosis of Sjögren's syndrome requires specific tests and evaluation by your doctor.

Sjögren's syndrome is a serious autoimmune disease and should not be taken lightly. If you suffer from any of the symptoms discussed above, be sure to talk to your doctor today about treatment options that may help provide relief from your dryness symptoms.