



# HEALTH AWARENESS

## Do You Know Your Family AQ?

(NAPSA)—There are steps you can take to protect yourself and your family from a major U.S. health issue. According to the National Institutes of Health, 23.5 million Americans suffer from autoimmune diseases (ADs), making them more prevalent than cancer, which in all its forms affects 9 million, and heart disease, which strikes 22 million.

ADs run in families. So it can be vital to know your Family AQ, or Autoimmune Quotient. To help, the American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association (AARDA) offers the following:

**1. Get educated.** There are more than 80 known ADs and an additional 40 suspected ones. They include multiple sclerosis, myasthenia gravis, scleroderma, polymyositis, vasculitis, lupus, Sjögren's syndrome and Crohn's disease. Autoimmunity—whereby the immune system mistakenly recognizes the body's own proteins as foreign invaders and produces antibodies to attack healthy cells and tissues—is the underlying cause of these diseases.

**2. Be aware that autoimmune diseases tend to target women.** Some estimates indicate that 75 percent of those affected are women in their childbearing years.

**3. Know that autoimmune diseases run in families.** Current research points to a genetic component. However, ADs are not typical genetic diseases, such as sickle cell anemia, where there is a specific gene mutation. With ADs, multiple genes are involved that collectively increase vulnerability or susceptibility. As a result, ADs tend to

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"cluster" in families—not as one particular condition but as a general tendency to the process and, consequently, different diseases.

**4. Do your own family medical history.** Given the family connection, knowing the health histories of other family members is critical. Once you know your family history, share it with your doctor.

**5. Keep a "symptoms" list.** People with ADs often suffer from a number of symptoms that, on the surface, seem unrelated. It's important, therefore, to list every major symptom you've experienced so you can present it clearly to your doctor.

**6. Recognize that getting an autoimmune disease diagnosis is often challenging.** One of the factors that makes getting a correct AD diagnosis so difficult is that symptoms can vary widely, notably from one disease to another but even within the same disease. Also, because ADs affect multiple systems, their symptoms can often be misleading.

Fortunately, you can find information and a complete AD list at [www.aarda.org](http://www.aarda.org).