

GETTING TO THE HEART OF AUTOIMMUNE

BY JODY BERGER
For the Deseret News

The symptoms started for Amy Myers during her second year of medical school. Initially, doctors dismissed the panic attacks, unexplained weight loss, and extreme muscular weakness. They said it was stress, that's all. Myers, who lived in New Orleans at the time, felt the cause was something more and demanded a complete battery of tests. She learned she had Graves disease, an autoimmune disorder in which the thyroid gland overproduces hormones. Like multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis and dozens of other autoimmune



diseases, Graves is commonly understood to be the result of an immune system that can't tell a friend from an enemy. The immune system that normally protects the body by attacking invaders is by mistake, attacking the body itself. There are more than 80 autoimmune disorders that affect as many as 50 million Americans and cost an estimated \$100 billion annually. Conventional wisdom says these conditions can neither be cured nor prevented, and treatment can only attempt to manage symptoms. Myers, however, is part of a growing number of doctors who argue that diet and nutrition can both prevent and reverse autoimmune disorders.

When Myers, now 46, received her diagnosis in 2002, doctors told her she had three choices to reduce the symptoms. She could take drug to slow the thyroid's production schedule, surgically remove the gland, or take a radioactive pill to kill it. Myers chose the first option and developed toxic hepatitis, so the drug went beyond her thyroid and damaged her liver as well. She stopped taking the drug and chose to destroy her thyroid with radiation — decision she regrets to this day. Now, 15 years later, an M.D. herself, Myers is on a mission to prevent other patients facing the same limited choices.

"Conventional medicine killed me," she writes in her new book, [The Autoimmune Solution](#). "I don't want it to fail you, too."

WALKING FROM WHEELCHAIR

Dr. Terry Wahls, 59, also began noticing symptoms in medical school in 1980. She felt short bursts of facial pain but dismissed them because they were sporadic and she had hospital rounds to complete and patients to see.

Wahls graduated in 1982, started her career as a physician in Iowa City, Iowa, married and had children. Then one day, 18 years later, she realized she was dragging her left foot. In 2000, she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, an autoimmune disorder of the central nervous system.

In 2007, at age 52, Wahls was so weak that she couldn't walk, and even holding herself upright to sit was exhausting. She needed a zero-gravity wheelchair, which was designed to keep her knees higher than her nose so gravity could keep her in the chair.

Wahls combed the medical literature and searched PubMed.gov, the public database of peer-reviewed research. Looking for clues to reverse her symptoms, she read about how cells need a variety of nutrients to repair themselves. After checking to make sure nutritional supplements wouldn't interfere with her medications, she started loading up on them.

Seeing results, she eventually chose to radically revamp her diet so she could eat the full range of nutrients instead of ingesting them in a pill form.

Three months in, Wahls could walk with a cane. Six months in, she could walk unassisted. A few years later, she gave a TED talk where she marched around the stage, waved her arms and showed pictures of her riding a new form of wheeled transportation: a mountain bike.

"We all have a choice," she said. "I choose to teach the public about the healing power of food."

REOPENING CONVENTIONS

Healing is rarely part of the conversation when talking about autoimmune diseases. Instead, the conversation often centers on the genetic causes of the disease. Since genes cannot be changed, doctors can only treat the symptoms, and patients must learn to live with the disease.



"That is totally wrong, and that is the standard presentation of autoimmune diseases," said Dr. Leo Galland, director of the Foundation for Integrated Medicine, which is based in New York, an award-winning clinician and the author of several highly acclaimed books.

The truth is more complicated and more empowering. "There are different mechanisms involved in different disorders," Galland said, adding that each autoimmune disorder could involve many genes, and all of them depend on the way those genes interact with the environment, diet, infections, pollutants and a person's nutritional status.

"It's a weaving together of all those things that create the condition," Galland said. "All of them need to be present."

For Myers, part of the solution is getting ahead of the problem — prevention, in other words. At the UltraHealth Medical Clinic in Austin, Texas, where she is the medical director, Myers tries to determine where people are on what she calls the autoimmune spectrum.

"All chronic disease starts with inflammation," Myers said.

On the low end of the autoimmune spectrum, people have some inflammation and tolerable symptoms, like acne or fatigue. If left unchecked, the inflammation increases, the symptoms become greater, and the person moves along the spectrum until he or she has an autoimmune disease.

In her book and at her clinic, Myers advises those suffering from autoimmune disorders — and people who may get them — to remove toxins, reduce stress, and commit to her 30-day meal plan.

Not all doctors agree. Dr. Noel Rose, who directs the Autoimmune Research Center at Johns Hopkins, began studying autoimmune diseases in the 1950s.

"We understand only a small part of what we need to know," he said. Large-scale studies of diet and autoimmunity are difficult so there is little data on the impact of nutrition.

"It's mostly anecdotal evidence," he said. "Someone puts themselves on a diet, they get better and tell friends. And it spreads."



FOOD RULES

Myers, Wahls, and Galland all agree on the pillars of a healthy diet and hope it does spread. And they emphasize diet for a simple reason. Myers, Wahls, and the millions of others who suffer from autoimmune disorders cannot control all the factors that contribute to the disorder, but they can control their diets.

"Diet can increase or reduce inflammation," Galland said. "It's not the same diet for everybody, but there are certain basic principals that really do make a difference."

Since publishing "Superimmunity for Kids" in 1989, Galland has been championing anti-inflammatory eating, which means a nutrient-dense diet made up mostly of whole foods with plenty of fruits and vegetables, nuts and seeds, and other healthy proteins.

WHAT DOCTORS DON'T SAY

Autoimmune disorders can be tricky to diagnose because the symptoms vary and may come and go. Patients often see several doctors before getting the correct diagnosis and few hear about diet as part of the treatment plan.

Myers wrote her book to bypass those doctors and speak to patients directly, even if they can't come to her clinic. Galland also makes his advice widely available in several books and on his website, pilladvised.com.

"Consumers need to be pro active," Galland said. "They need to seek out information and bring it to their specialists... The good ones will be responsive."

And they can start down that proactive road, Galland said, by helping themselves by changing their diets. "If you just start with that," Galland said, "If everybody with an autoimmune disorder in this country ate according to these principals, that by itself would go a long way to reducing the disease burden in this country."

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