

What is Autoimmune Encephalitis?

Autoimmune encephalitis is a complex disease in which the body's immune system makes cells that mistakenly attack the brain. It may be caused by a number of different antibodies, so each person's experience may be different. People with autoimmune encephalitis often have a combination of neurological and psychiatric symptoms. These symptoms often progress rather rapidly, within weeks to a few months. The possible triggers are many and include various types of infections, ovarian tumors called teratomas, as well as unknown causes.

Commonly experienced neurological symptoms include problems with memory and thinking, confusion, abnormal movements, seizures, headaches and problems with speech and vision. Eventually a decreased level of consciousness may result.

Psychiatric symptoms may include psychosis, which can result in delusions (false beliefs), hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that others do not see or hear) and paranoia. Other psychiatric symptoms in AE might include incoherent or nonsense speech and inappropriate behavior including agitation, hypersexuality, impulsivity or aggression. Some people with AE may experience depression, anxiety, insomnia, social withdrawal, emotional dysfunction and a lack of motivation.

Autoimmune encephalitis is distinct from psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar and depression, although symptoms of these diseases overlap with those of AE. It is also distinct from other autoimmune diseases such as lupus and multiple sclerosis. Misdiagnosis as a primary psychiatric disease can be a problem so it is imperative that people with a rapid onset of symptoms are evaluated by a neurologist as earlier treatment leads to better outcomes. Prompt treatment with immunotherapy leads to improvement or full recovery in the majority of cases. Relapses do occur in some people and long-term immunosuppression may be necessary.