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Have an autoimmune condition? You may be at higher risk of depression and anxiety

EuroNews (English) · 27 Jun 2025 · 26 · Gabriela Galvin

People with autoimmune disorders are nearly twice as likely to have mental health issues, a large new study has found.



The analysis, which was published on Wednesday in the journal BMJ Mental Health, spanned about 1.5 million people across the UK, including nearly 38,000 who said they had been diagnosed with an autoimmune condition such as rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease, and psoriasis. Twenty-nine per cent of autoimmune patients had been diagnosed at some point in their lives with a mental health problem such as depression, anxiety, or bipolar disorder, compared with 18 per cent among everyone else. Overall, about 26 per cent of autoimmune patients had depression, 21 per cent had anxiety, and 1 per cent had bipolar disorder, the study found. Autoimmune patients were also more likely to say that either of their parents had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder.

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Notably, women were more likely than men to report mental health issues, even when they both had autoimmune disorders - 32 per cent to 21 per cent.

Researchers said there may be differences between sex hormones, chromosomal factors, and circulating antibodies that could help explain differences between the genders.

The findings underscore the link between mental and physical health problems, and shed new light on the role that severe, ongoing inflammation - a hallmark of autoimmune disorders - could play in mental health.

“Many psychiatrists do not think of psychiatric disorders as above-the- neck disorders,” Dr Daniel Smith, head of the psychiatry division at the University of Edinburgh and the study’s senior author, said during a press briefing attended by Euronews Health.

“They are full body disorders,” he added, “with massive comorbidity of physical health problems”.

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The study has some limitations, notably that 57 per cent of the participants were women and 90 per cent of all participants were white. It also wasn’t clear whether people’s autoimmune disorders caused their mental health problems, or if they simply happened to overlap.

Even so, the results suggest that chronic inflammation could raise the risk of mental health issues, which is in line with previous studies.

The study authors said doctors should consider regular mental health screenings for autoimmune patients, particularly women, in order to filter them into treatment early on, if needed.

“If we want to understand them, we have to take a full body perspective,” Smith said.