

# Autoimmune-Related Cognitive Problems: A Guide for Patients & Families

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Autoimmune-related cognitive problems refer to cognitive decline that occurs when the body's immune system mistakenly attacks healthy tissues, including the brain. Conditions such as multiple sclerosis, lupus, and other autoimmune disorders can lead to brain inflammation and damage, resulting in cognitive impairment and changes in behavior.

## Signs & Symptoms to Watch For

### Common Cognitive Symptoms

- Difficulty with memory and recalling recent events
- Trouble with concentration and attention
- Slower processing speed or difficulty with decision-making
- Confusion or difficulty with complex tasks
- Trouble following conversations or understanding complex information

### Behavioral & Emotional Changes

- Mood swings, depression, or irritability
- Anxiety or panic attacks
- Apathy or lack of interest in activities
- Increased emotional sensitivity or outbursts

### Motor Symptoms (Depending on the Condition)

- Weakness or fatigue
- Difficulty walking or maintaining balance
- Stiffness or muscle spasms
- Tremors or involuntary movements

## Typical Presentation & Progression

### Early Stage

- Mild cognitive changes such as forgetfulness or trouble concentrating
- Subtle changes in mood or behavior, such as irritability or sadness
- Difficulty with complex tasks or decision-making

### Middle Stage

- Increased cognitive symptoms, such as significant memory problems and difficulty following conversations
- Noticeable changes in mood, including depression or anxiety
- Physical symptoms such as weakness, balance issues, or motor difficulties

### Late Stage

- Severe cognitive decline, including memory loss and difficulty with basic tasks
- Complete dependence on others for daily activities
- Significant motor dysfunction, including difficulty walking or moving independently

## Medications FDA-Approved for Cognitive Symptoms

### Symptom-Targeted Medications

- No specific medications are approved for autoimmune-related cognitive problems.
- Medications may be prescribed to manage underlying autoimmune conditions, such as immunosuppressants or disease-modifying therapies.
- Cognitive symptoms may be managed with medications used for other types of dementia, such as donepezil (Aricept®) or memantine (Namenda®).

### Disease-Modifying Therapies

- Disease-modifying therapies (e.g., interferons, rituximab) are used to manage the underlying autoimmune condition and reduce inflammation, which may improve cognitive symptoms in some cases.

## Diagnostic Tests Your Healthcare Team May Use

### Clinical & Cognitive Evaluation

- Review of medical history and autoimmune disease diagnosis
- Cognitive testing to assess memory, attention, and executive function

### Laboratory Tests

- Blood tests to monitor autoimmune markers, inflammation levels, and potential vitamin deficiencies
- Testing for specific antibodies related to autoimmune diseases (e.g., lupus, rheumatoid arthritis)

### Imaging Studies

- MRI or CT scans to identify brain inflammation, lesions, or damage caused by autoimmune processes
- PET scans may be used to assess brain metabolism and function in research settings

## Planning for the Future

### Healthcare Planning

- Discuss care preferences and goals, especially if symptoms worsen over time
- Set up advance directives and healthcare power of attorney
- Plan for potential future medical treatments or interventions, such as immunosuppressive therapies

### Legal & Financial Planning

- Appoint a durable financial power of attorney
- Review long-term care insurance and financial planning options
- Consult an elder-care attorney to assist with legal planning and estate protection

### Support for Caregivers

- Establish a regular caregiving routine, particularly for managing both cognitive and physical symptoms
- Reach out to support groups and seek caregiver education
- Ensure caregivers have access to respite care and other support services

## National Organizations & Resources

✓ **\*\*National Multiple Sclerosis Society\*\***

☎ 1-800-344-4867 | 🌐 [nationalmssociety.org](https://nationalmssociety.org)

✓ **\*\*Lupus Foundation of America\*\***

☎ 1-800-558-0121 | 🌐 [lupus.org](https://lupus.org)

✓ **\*\*National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS)\*\***

☎ 1-800-352-9424 | 🌐 [ninds.nih.gov](https://ninds.nih.gov)

✓ **\*\*Eldercare Locator\*\***

☎ 1-800-677-1116 | 🌐 [eldercare.acl.gov](https://eldercare.acl.gov)

## Final Notes

- Early recognition and treatment of autoimmune conditions can help prevent further cognitive decline and improve quality of life.
- Treatment focuses on managing the underlying autoimmune disease, which may help reduce symptoms.
- Ongoing support for caregivers is essential to ensure the best care for individuals with autoimmune-related cognitive problems.