

# AUTOIMMUNE AND EYE DISEASES 101



VISION HEALTH  
ADVOCACY COALITION



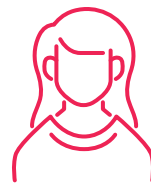
Perspective from  
Paras Shah, MD &  
Chris Yedinak, DNP



## What is the connection between autoimmune diseases and vision conditions?

**Dr. Shah:** In some instances, an autoimmune disease itself can impact the eye. This is the case with rheumatoid arthritis, Sjögren's syndrome or lupus. In other instances, medications used to treat autoimmune disease can affect vision. Steroids, for example, can impact vision.

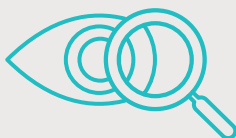
Autoimmune diseases are most commonly attributable to more nuanced eye problems like redness, eye sensitivity or dry eyes. If left unmonitored, however, autoimmune diseases can cause long-term vision conditions like glaucoma or cataracts to develop.



## Are autoimmune patients aware that they may encounter vision problems?

**Chris:** Many patients with autoimmune diseases are unaware of a developing vision condition or that it may be a byproduct of their disease. Patients are so focused on treating the more recognizable symptoms, such as inflammation and joint pain, that they don't recognize their "other" symptoms such as vision issues.

When treating patients who have an autoimmune condition, I like to spend a few moments educating them about the connection between the two. I refer them for an assessment from an ophthalmologist.



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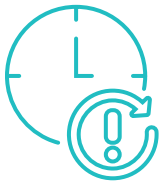




## What treatment options are available for autoimmune patients experiencing vision problems?

**Dr. Shah:** Over-the-counter medications can suffice as treatment for most mild-to-moderate vision problems. For dry eyes, for instance, I'll recommend artificial tears.

But then there are patients experiencing persistent and more severe vision issues. That might be uveitis, which is inflammation in the eye, or thyroid eye disease, an autoimmune disease that causes swelling and inflammation behind the eye. For patients living with conditions like these, over-the-counter medications are not effective. These patients need a more systemic treatment approach that may consist of prescription medication, lifestyle modification and drinking plenty of water every day.



## What happens when patients are delayed or unable to access the medication they need?

**Chris:** Gaps in treatment create more risk for an autoimmune patient. Symptoms can worsen, and patients face the probability of developing a more serious condition.

Thinking back over my career, I have seen patients without timely treatment lose their

peripheral vision, balance, and the ability to read and drive at night. Particularly in elderly patients, falling is also common.

**Dr. Shah:** Unfortunately, most prescription medication to treat vision conditions lacks sufficient health care coverage. Too many times I have witnessed how high out-of-pocket costs can price patients out of treatment. It can also be disheartening for patients living with an autoimmune disease, as they are burdened with the financial, physical and mental strain of their condition.



## How could policymakers help?

**Chris:** Policymakers should make sure patients with serious vision conditions like thyroid eye disease, uveitis or glaucoma are not delayed in receiving specific and effective treatment by step therapy or high out-of-pocket costs.

Policies that provide greater access to effective treatments at a reasonable cost to patients will lessen the struggle that autoimmune patients experiencing vision problems too often face. This preserves functionality, reduces unnecessary disability and improves quality of life.

