

# Medical mysteries: Seeing right doctor for rheumatic disease is key

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Medical mysteries have become the topic for several popular television shows - allowing large TV audiences a quick glimpse into the challenges faced by those who suffer from rare, bizarre, or little-known illnesses. In an hour or less, viewers can see how mysterious symptoms and wrong diagnoses cause years of frustration and suffering when medical answers prove illusive.

There are millions of other Americans, whose stories don't make it onto television, suffering from a constellation of confounding [symptoms](#) that make life painful and difficult - all while stumping their [health care providers](#). The fortunate ones eventually make their way to a doctor who recognizes the telltale signs of these mysterious and debilitating illnesses, and - if caught early enough - can do something to help.

Rheumatologists at Mayo Clinic have had the opportunity to treat hundreds of these patients with previously undiagnosed "mystery" diseases - with symptoms ranging from joint and muscle pain, inflammation and swelling, to eye irritation, general fatigue, hair loss, dry eyes, chest pain, seizures and even stroke. It's not uncommon for previously healthy adults and children to suddenly and inexplicably lose function and begin experiencing odd symptoms and unrelenting pain.

While not immediately or easily recognizable, these sometimes peculiar presentations can indicate serious rheumatic illness. There are, in fact, hundreds of conditions often lumped under the umbrella term "arthritis"

affecting more than 52 million Americans. Rheumatoid arthritis, gout, lupus, Sjogren's syndrome, ankylosing spondylitis and [juvenile idiopathic arthritis](#) are a few of the most common.

Suffering for years without answers or treatment is not only frustrating for patients; it can create irreversible, long-term damage to the body's joints and tissues. That's why it's crucial that persistent, unexplainable, troubling symptoms be promptly investigated by a trained rheumatologist.

Perhaps the most important thing for the public to keep in mind is that [rheumatic diseases](#) are much more than the aches and pains of getting older. They are serious, debilitating, and increase the risk for even greater health issues if not treated within the first few weeks or months after symptoms first appear. Individuals living with rheumatic diseases may be at increased risk of cancer, heart diseases, kidney failure, diabetes, lung diseases and miscarriages, just to name a few.

With such a broad range of health consequences, it's not surprising that rheumatic diseases are the leading cause of disability in America <sup>?</sup> even more than heart disease, cancer or diabetes. They are also expensive, costing the U.S. health care system and economy an estimated \$128 billion annually, including approximately \$80.8 billion in annual medical expenditures and \$47 billion in indirect costs, such as lost earnings.

This September, as we recognize the first Rheumatic Disease Awareness Month sponsored by the American College of Rheumatology, I hope that anyone experiencing troubling, inexplicable symptoms will take steps to find out whether they might be suffering from one of the many rheumatic illnesses that are frequently undiagnosed. An excellent first step is visiting [SimpleTasks.org](#) to learn more about these conditions, and identifying a local, trained rheumatologist who can help. While there is currently no cure for rheumatic diseases, early intervention and

treatment provided by a rheumatologist can help patients manage symptoms and maintain a normal quality of life.

For millions of Americans, solving the "mystery" behind many frightening health conditions could be as simple as becoming more educated about symptoms [\[7\]](#) and learning how and when to seek help.

- Eric L. Matteson, M.D., M.P.H., rheumatologist and professor of medicine at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.; president, Rheumatology Research Foundation of the American College of Rheumatology.

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