

JOB ACCOMMODATIONS AND AT SUPPORT WORKERS WITH AUTOIMMUNE DISEASES

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) estimates that up to 23.5 million Americans have an autoimmune disease, making it the third most common disease category in the U.S. following cancer and heart disease. Approximately 78 percent of those with autoimmune diseases are women according to the article, “Women and Autoimmune Diseases,” published in the *Journal of Emerging Infectious Disease* (Fairweather, 2004). If you have an autoimmune disease, you may experience limitations and disability that can make it difficult to work. This guide, designed by [AbleData](#) in partnership with the [Job Accommodation Network \(JAN\)](#), offers an overview of reasonable accommodations and assistive technology (AT) products that can help address workplace limitations resulting from the effects of the most common autoimmune diseases.



What are Autoimmune Diseases and How Can They Affect Your Work?

The immune system defends the body from germs and other foreign invaders (i.e., viruses, bacteria, and parasites). But in some cases, as the Johns Hopkins Autoimmune Disease Research Center describes, the immune system “goes awry and attacks the body itself” including healthy organs, tissues, and cells. The type of autoimmune disease you have depends on which area of the body your immune system wrongly attacks. It may be in the joints and connective tissue, the central and/or peripheral nervous system, intestinal tract, or endocrine organs.

There are more than 80 known autoimmune diseases with varying symptoms, all resulting in chronic conditions that can affect many aspects of daily life, including employment. We present eight conditions: rheumatoid arthritis (RA), lupus, multiple sclerosis (MS), Guillain-Barre syndrome (GBS), Graves’ disease, Hashimoto’s disease, myasthenia gravis (MG), and cataplexy. A brief description of each disease is included in Appendix A and includes information about symptoms and treatment options.

These diseases can affect physical and mental functions. While each disease and individual is different, there are some common limitations you may experience if you have an autoimmune disease including body fatigue and weakness, fine and gross motor limitations, difficulty with activities of daily living (ADL), temperature sensitivity, speech impairments, vision impairments, cognitive limitations, and photosensitivity.

You may experience one or many of these limitations depending on your diagnosis and symptoms. The severity of symptoms and limitations also varies. Table 1 summarizes the major limitations associated with specific diseases.

Table 1: Functional Limitations Associated with Specific Autoimmune Diseases

	Fatigue	Motor	ADL	Temperature	Speech	Vision	Cognitive	Photosensitivity
RA	yes	yes	yes	yes				yes
Lupus	yes	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes	yes
MS	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes	yes	
GBS	yes	yes	yes					
Graves'	yes			yes				
Hashimoto's	yes			yes				
MG	yes	yes			yes	yes		
Cataplexy	yes	yes			yes			

These limitations may have a negative impact on your job performance if not properly managed. For example, if you are easily fatigued, you may not be able to meet productivity standards. If you have trouble speaking clearly, you may not be able to communicate with customers and coworkers effectively. If you have trouble with memory or concentration, you may not be able to produce quality work. However, there are accommodations and AT devices that can address various limitations and help you maintain good job performance.

Reasonable Accommodations and AT Devices Provide Solutions in the Workplace

When your limitations affect your work, you can consider appropriate job accommodations and AT devices to help you maintain good job performance.

What is a Job Accommodation?

An accommodation is any modification or adjustment to a job or the work environment that will enable a qualified applicant or employee with a disability to participate in the application process or to perform essential job functions. Accommodations vary and can include physical changes that make the workplace more accessible. For example:

- moving an employee's work station closer to the restroom might be more convenient for him or her if he has a mobility disability;
- allowing an employee who is sensitive to temperature changes may feel more comfortable if he or she can use a space heater or air filter; or
- adjusting the brightness of the workstation's lighting could help an employee who has photosensitivity.

There are also job accommodations that do not require physical workplace modifications. For example, flexible scheduling and telework options or the use of a personal aide or service animal. In addition, assistive technology (AT) can be provided as a form of job accommodation as described in the following section.

Job accommodations differ from person to person depending on your symptoms and limitations, profession, and personal preferences. You need to work with your employer to identify what accommodations are needed, how to implement them, and how to assess how well they work.

AT as a Job Accommodation

AT is any tool, product, or solution that improves productivity or eases the performance in the completion of a task. AT can be used as a job accommodation to help address limitations, reduce burden, and increase work productivity. There are many kinds of AT ranging from complex computer applications to simple do-it-yourself modifications. It can be difficult to choose the best device. You may need to work with your employer in the selection process, especially if the device interfaces with existing workplace systems.

Table 2: Questions to Consider

Planning Job Accommodations	Choosing AT Devices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What limitations am I experiencing? • How do these limitations affect me and my job performance? • What specific job tasks are problematic as a result of these limitations? • What accommodations are available to reduce or eliminate these problems? • Are all possible resources being used to determine possible accommodations? • Have my employer and I worked together regarding possible accommodations? • Once accommodations are in place, would it be useful to evaluate the effectiveness of the accommodations and to determine whether additional accommodations are needed? • Do supervisory personnel and employees need training about my condition and my AT? <p>From JAN Accommodation and Compliance Series: Employees with Lupus</p>	<p>Performance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the device work well? Does it help me do what I need to do? • Is it easy to use and set up? Will I have to be trained to operate the device? • Is it dependable? • Will it work with other technologies I use? • Is there convenient technical support available? <p>Comfort</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the device physically comfortable? • Will it likely cause pain, strain, or fatigue with prolonged use? <p>Cost</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the device affordable to purchase and maintain? <p>Appearance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the device fit well within my work environment? • Do the style, size, and weight work for me? <p>From Tips for Choosing AT Products for Yourself</p>

Reasonable Accommodations and AT Devices by Limitation

Below are some reasonable accommodations and AT devices that can be used to address limitations that may result from autoimmune diseases. These are general guidelines to give you an idea of possible solutions. As each situation is unique, you (and in some cases, you and your employer) will need to determine which ideas may be most helpful.

Body Fatigue and Weakness

Body fatigue and weakness are two of the most common limitations associated with autoimmune diseases. You may not be able to exert yourself for prolonged periods or maintain significant, repeated activities. There are many possible accommodations and

AT products that may help you reduce or eliminate physical exertion related to completing different job tasks.

Reasonable accommodations:

- Schedule periodic rest breaks away from your workstation or try to work from home or explore other telework options. To accommodate flare ups, negotiate a flexible work schedule with your employer and/or use leave time.
- Relocate your workstation, with your employer's consent, so that it is closer to the restrooms, meeting rooms, parking lot, or other frequent destinations.
- Consider teleconference options for meeting attendance.
- In some cases, having an aide or coworker who can perform certain job-related tasks may help to conserve your energy. The aide can run work errands, retrieve materials, and perform other physical tasks. Work with your employer to explore your options.

AT devices and products:

- A scooter or walker may help reduce exertion related to walking longer distances. Scooters include both indoor and outdoor models. Walkers are available in many sizes and styles – some also have wheels and/or seats if you need them.
- Stand/lean stools allow you to adjust positioning, relieve standing strain by leaning (on them), help support your body in a standing position, and minimize leg fatigue. They are made for industrial and office environments.
- Anti-fatigue matting is designed to stimulate leg muscles and lessen fatigue; and may be useful if you have a job that requires a lot of standing.
- There are a number of mobile apps that you can use to track your symptoms, identify activity patterns, and manage fatigue by scheduling tasks and breaks. Most are available for free for Apple and Android mobile devices and can be found by searching for keywords like “fatigue,” “health,” and “symptoms” in iTunes or Google Play.



Fine and Gross Motor Limitations

Fine and gross motor limitations are often experienced by those with RA, lupus, MS, and other autoimmune diseases. You may have numbness, pain, stiffness, and weakness in the hands and arms; and pain, swelling, spasticity, weakness, and loss of balance in the legs. Many job accommodations and AT products that help with fatigue may also help with motor limitations. Additional strategies and products are below.

Reasonable Accommodations:

- Complete an ergonomic assessment of your worksite to identify ways to reduce repetitive motions, overuse of muscles, and poor posture that can aggravate limitations. Good ergonomics can ease movements and minimize physical strain. Ergonomic office equipment such as copyholders, monitor risers, keyboard trays, keyboard rests, and foot rests may help.
- Use multi-purpose carts to move, carry, or transfer items in the workplace.

AT devices and products:

- Speech recognition software, which converts your words to text, provides an alternative route if you cannot easily use a mouse or a standard keyboard to access a computer. You can also access computer function commands with voice instructions.
- Small material handling devices may help you with lifting and carrying items. These portable devices come with height-adjustable platforms for picking up and carrying items. Typically powered by batteries, hydraulic foot pumps, or hand cranks, these platforms can be raised or lowered to help reduce the strain of bending and lifting.
- A variety of canes, crutches, and walkers are available to help with balance problems when walking. Consider the features carefully or consult your healthcare professionals to find the best match that meets your needs.



Difficulty with Activities of Daily Living

ADLs are self-care tasks such as walking, bathing, dressing, grooming, eating, using the restroom, etc. Difficulty with these activities can affect your ability to get ready for work and manage breaks during the work day. Depending on your level of need, accommodations and AT devices can support your independence.

Reasonable accommodations:

- Work with your employer to arrange easy access to the restroom and kitchen areas.
- Use a personal assistant at work to help with eating lunch and using the restroom. The assistant can also help with job-related tasks as appropriate.

AT devices and products:

- Easy-grip cutlery, adapted utensils, utensil holders, non-slip mats for plates and bowls, straws, and cups with adapted lids and handles can aid with eating and drinking.
- Adaptive clothing may make it easier to get ready for work, as well as managing restroom breaks during the day. In addition, there are small dressing aids such as button hooks, zipper pulls, sock aids, elastic shoelaces, etc. that could be helpful in the dressing and un-dressing process.



Temperature Sensitivity

Sensitivity to cold is a feeling of pain when exposed to a drop in indoor or outdoor temperature. Sensitivity to heat leads to increased sweating and may temporarily heighten other symptoms with the increase in environmental temperature. The type and degree of temperature sensitivity varies from person to person and by condition. Depending on your level of need, many accommodations and AT devices may help address these challenges.

Reasonable accommodations:

- Work with your employer to ensure there are no extreme temperature changes in the workplace.
- Ask your employer for a flexible work schedule and flexible use of leave time during inclement or extreme cold or hot weather.

AT devices and products:

- Battery-powered-heated clothing such as jackets, footwear liners, gloves, and scarves can help with cold sensitivity. These articles of clothing offer hours of added warmth, and multiple heat settings for increased temperature regulation and control.
- Personal cooling systems such as neoprene neck wraps and misting systems can help with heat sensitivity.
- Heaters, fans, or portable air conditioners at your workstation can help.



Speech Impairments

Due to weakness in muscles in the tongue, lips, cheeks, and mouth, you may experience slurring or long pauses in your speech that make it difficult for you to talk or be

understood. There are a few accommodations, and many AT devices to address speech challenges.

Reasonable accommodations:

- Communicate through typing or writing messages.
- Ask co-workers to be patient and to listen carefully as you speak.

AT devices and products:

- Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices generate speech. You can type words and sentences or touch pictures and symbols that the devices will then say aloud. Options include dedicated AAC devices about the size of a tablet, computer programs for your own computer, and apps for your mobile device.
- For a low-tech approach, you can use a communication book. You assemble key images and words from preprinted cards, templates, clip art, and personal photos into a notebook or cardholder and communicate with a person by showing him or her your message.



Vision Impairments

Vision impairments may include dimming, blurred, and double vision. The type of limitation and severity varies depending upon your specific condition. There are a number of accommodation strategies along with AT devices and products to help you compensate for vision impairments.

Reasonable accommodations:

- Request work-related materials to be made available in large print.
- Arrange for frequent breaks to give your eyes a rest.
- Have an aide or reader who can help you complete certain job-related tasks such as reading printed material, transcribing notes, filling out forms, etc.

AT devices and products:

- Hand-held magnifiers and stand magnifiers help you view hard copy materials.
- Portable electronic magnifiers are versatile for both work and home use. Some aid in viewing text, maps, photos, etc. Some aid in viewing objects at a distance, while others work with computer programs.
- Screen magnification software enlarge text and graphics on a computer screen.
- A large high-resolution computer monitor can enhance viewing capabilities, especially if you are already enlarging texts and graphics on the screen.
- Screen reading software converts text displayed on the computer to speech. The software can usually be configured to individual needs.
- Anti-glare filters and computer glasses help relieve eyestrain, fatigue, and headaches associated with continued viewing of computer monitors by reducing glare. Most computer glasses have lenses that include an anti-reflective coating, which help eliminate reflections of light from the surfaces of your lenses and make reading digital screens easier.



Cognitive Limitations

A number of reasonable accommodations and AT devices can help you manage cognitive limitations such as memory and concentration problems.

Reasonable accommodations:

- Audio record meetings to support recall of information.
- Use notebooks, calendars, and checklists to record information.
- Ask for written and verbal instructions to enhance recall.
- Use the electronic calendars provided by e-mail services like AOL and Gmail, and software like MS Outlook, to list everyday tasks, schedule appointments, and receive reminders.
- With your employer's help, use environmental cues to assist in memory for locations of items (e.g., labels, color coding, or bulletin boards) and post instructions by the equipment you operate.
- To enhance concentration, work with your employer to reduce distractions in the work area. A private office may also help if this is an option for your employer.

AT devices and products:

- Audio recorders can help compensate for memory impairment by providing repetition and reinforcement. There are many affordable, pocket-sized digital recorders that can hold hours of recordings which can then be downloaded to a computer for future reference.
- Consumer mobile devices such as cell phones, smartphones, music players, and tablets often come pre-loaded with calendars, alarm reminders, task lists, maps, and other useful cognitive support tools.
- Environmental sound machines help block out extraneous noises that are distracting.
- Noise canceling headsets can be used to help reduce distractions from other work noises. Several styles are available including over-the-head, on-the-ear, behind-the-ear, and in-ear headsets. Some headsets are also available in wireless option.
- Personal frequency modulation (FM) systems assist with focus and concentration by providing auditory feedback to amplify and focus a speaker's voice making it more distinct than background noises.

Photosensitivity

Photosensitivity, sensitivity to UV radiation from the sun or artificial light source, can lead to rashes and pain, as well as trigger autoimmune disease flare ups. To address photosensitivity, there are many accommodations and some AT devices that may help.

Reasonable accommodations:

- Ask for a flexible schedule to avoid peak sun hours or telework so you can work in a more easily controlled environment.
- Arrange your workspace to limit exposure to highly reflective surfaces.
- If you work outdoors, combine tasks to limit exposure.
- If your work involves driving, use window tinting and shades on work vehicles if your employer permits it.
- For indoor work, work with your employer to explore ideas such as a windowless office, no fluorescent lighting, or alternative lighting such as LED lighting.

AT devices and products:

- Full spectrum lighting or filters (to cover fluorescent lights) reduce glare and block UV rays.
- UV filtered computer screens help eliminate nearly all of the UV rays that can reflect from your screen into your eyes.
- UV protective clothing and accessories are available for those who work outdoors.



Many people have autoimmune diseases that lead to a range of functional limitations in the workplace. The good news is that there are many ways to minimize these limitations and maintain good job performance. With the information provided in this guide, you and your employer can begin to work together to arrange appropriate reasonable accommodations and provide effective AT devices that will support you in your workplace. For more information on accommodations, search JAN's [Searchable Online Accommodation Resource \(SOAR\)](#). You can search through SOAR for accommodations by impairment. For more information on AT products that may help you, use the *Search AbleData* feature on AbleData's [homepage](#) by keywords or product names. Visit AbleData's [Search & Browse Help](#) to assist you.



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JAN is the leading source of free, expert, and confidential guidance on workplace accommodations and disability employment issues. JAN provided the included information on accommodations as well as the medial information on autoimmune disorders. One of several services provided by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability



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AbleData is the premier source for impartial, comprehensive information on products, solutions, and resources to improve productivity and ease with life's tasks. AbleData staff provide a wealth of information to assist domestic and international customers and their family members, vendors, distributors,

Employment Policy (ODEP), JAN works toward practical solutions that benefit both employer and employee. They help people with disabilities enhance their employability, and show employers how to capitalize on the value and talent that people with disabilities add to the workplace. JAN's trusted consultants offer one-on-one guidance on workplace accommodations, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and related legislation, and self-employment and entrepreneurship options for people with disabilities. Assistance is available both over the phone and online.

organizations, professionals and caregivers in understanding AT options and available programs. Customers can access this information through AbleData's online database or by contacting the Information and Referral Center via phone or e-mail. AbleData is funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), Administration for Community Living (ACL), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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This publication was written and produced by AbleData. AbleData is funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under contract number ED-OSE-13-C-0064 and operated by New Editions Consulting, Inc.

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Appendix A: Overview of Common Autoimmune Diseases

Disease	Description and Symptoms	Limitations
Rheumatoid arthritis (RA)	<p>According to a new study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 52.5 million U.S. adults had arthritis in 2010-2012, which is an increase of 2.5 million from 2007-2009. It is estimated that by the year 2030, arthritis will affect 67 million adults nationwide ("The Prevalence of Arthritis").</p> <p>Rheumatoid arthritis (RA), a chronic, systemic inflammatory disease, is a type of arthritis that develops when the immune system "[attacks] tissues in the joints." It is characterized by pain and swelling in multiple joints, morning stiffness, general malaise and fatigue, muscle pain, joint deformities, decreased appetite, and weight loss ("The Arthritis Challenge"). There is no cure for RA, but treatment options - including medications - are available, each designed to "relieve pain, decrease inflammation, slow down or stop damage to the joints, and improve overall functioning" (McCoy).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty with activities of daily living • Body fatigue and weakness • Temperature sensitivity • Fine and gross motor impairments • Photosensitivity (Loy, 2013)
Lupus	<p>Lupus is a "chronic, inflammatory, multisystem disorder" that occurs when the body "develops antibodies that react against the person's own normal tissue" ("The Arthritis Challenge"). Approximately 1.5 million people in the U.S. have lupus, and more than 16,000 new cases are reported every year across the country ("What is lupus?"). The manifestation of this autoimmune disease can range from mild - where minimal intervention is required - to severe - where there is significant damage affecting vital organs, such as the lungs, heart, kidney, and brain.</p> <p>Common symptoms of lupus include "joint pain, skin rashes, seizures, oral ulcers, photosensitivity, and anemia" ("The Arthritis Challenge"). Treatment will vary depending on the severity of the disease, but it can include "pain relievers, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), immunosuppressants, corticosteroids, and lifestyle changes," such as "reducing stress, avoiding sun</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty with activities of daily living • Body fatigue and weakness • Cognitive limitations • Temperature sensitivity • Fine and gross motor impairments • Photosensitivity • Vision impairments (Dorinzi, 2014)

Disease	Description and Symptoms	Limitations
	exposure, using sunscreen, and making changes to your diet” (McCoy).	
Graves’	Graves’ disease occurs when the immune system produces an antibody that stimulates the thyroid gland and causes it to make an excess of thyroid hormone. This can lead to “nervousness or irritability, fatigue or muscle weakness, heat intolerance, trouble sleeping, hand tremors, rapid and irregular heartbeat, frequent bowel movements or diarrhea, weight loss, goiter,” and retracted eyelids/bulging eyes. Three treatment options are available, including radioiodine therapy, medications, and thyroid surgery (“Graves’ Disease”).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Body fatigue and weakness • Temperature sensitivity (“Accommodation Ideas for Thyroid Disorders”)
Hashimoto's	Unlike Graves' disease, Hashimoto's disease occurs when the “immune system attacks the thyroid gland in the neck, prohibiting it from producing hormones.” Thus, the end result is a low production of thyroid hormone, not an excess. Symptoms of Hashimoto's disease include “feelings of fullness/tightness in [the] throat, trouble swallowing, swelling or bump in the front of the neck, tiredness, forgetfulness, depression, coarse dry skin, slow heartbeat, weight gain, constipation, and intolerance to cold.” A lot of people, however, do not develop any symptoms to this particular disease.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Body fatigue and weakness • Temperature sensitivity (“Accommodation Ideas for Thyroid Disorders”)
MS	MS, a chronic autoimmune disease of the central nervous system, develops when the immune system attacks myelin, the “fatty substance that surrounds and insulates the nerve fibers.” Damaged myelin distorts or interrupts “nerve impulses traveling to and from the brain and spinal cord,” leading to a wide variety of symptoms (“Definition of MS”). They include blurred or double vision, muscle weakness, Paresthesias (numbness or prickling sensations), pain, speech impediments, tremors, dizziness, depression, cognitive impairments (i.e., difficulties with concentration, attention, memory, and poor judgment), hearing loss, difficulty with coordination and balance, and partial or complete paralysis (“NINDS”). There is no cure for MS, but therapies are available to help “moderate or relieve MS symptoms, including physical therapy, exercise, vocational and cognitive rehabilitation,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties with activities of daily living • Body fatigue and weakness • Fine and gross motor impairments • Cognitive impairments • Speech impairments • Vision impairments (Carter Batiste, 2013)

Disease	Description and Symptoms	Limitations
MG	<p>attention to diet, adequate rest, and counseling,” as well as medications (Carter Batiste, 2013).</p> <p>Myasthenia Gravis (MG) is a “chronic autoimmune neuromuscular disorder that is characterized by fluctuating weakness of the voluntary muscle groups.” Derived from the Greek and Latin words meaning “grave muscular weakness,” MG affects approximately 20 out of 100,000 individuals in the U.S.</p> <p>Symptoms can include a drooping eyelid, blurred or double vision, slurred speech, difficulty chewing and swallowing, weakness in the arms and legs, chronic muscle fatigue, and difficulty breathing (“What is Myasthenia Gravis”). There is no known cure for MG, but common treatments include medications, thymectomy (surgical removal of the thymus), plasmapheresis (plasma exchange), rest, and a well-balanced diet (Carter Batiste, 2013).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Body fatigue and weakness • Fine and gross motor impairments • Speech impairments • Vision impairments (Carter Batiste, 2013)
Cataplexy	<p>Cataplexy is a “sudden loss of muscle tone” that is “often triggered by sudden, strong emotions, such as fear, anger, stress, excitement, or humor.” Among all of them, laughter is the most common type of trigger (“Narcolepsy Fact Sheet”). Cataplectic attacks can occur at any time during the waking period, lasting for a couple of seconds up to five minutes, and you remain conscious throughout the entire attack (“Accommodation Ideas for Cataplexy”).</p> <p>Cataplectic attacks also vary in severity, from barely perceived “loss of muscle tone” (i.e., mild drooping of the eyelids) to a “complete loss of tone in all voluntary muscles.” In such severe cases, the cataplectic attack may lead to “physical collapse during which [you] are unable to move, speak, or keep [your] eyes open” (“Narcolepsy Fact Sheet”). Other symptoms of cataplexy may include balance issues and/or upper extremity weakness.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Body fatigue and weakness • Fine and gross motor impairments • Speech impairments (“Accommodation Ideas for Cataplexy”)
GBS	<p>With Guillain-Barre Syndrome (GBS), the peripheral nervous system is under attack by the body’s own immune system. At the onset individuals may feel “varying degrees of weakness or tingling sensations in the legs,” feelings that can - and most often times do - “spread</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty with activities of daily living • Body fatigue and weakness

Disease	Description and Symptoms	Limitations
	<p>[symmetrically] to the arms and upper body.” If these symptoms intensify, they can lead to the forfeiture of certain muscles, or in the most severe cases, complete paralysis.</p> <p>There is no known cure for GBS, but there are therapies that can help lessen the severity of the disease and accelerate the recovery. They include plasmapheresis and immunoglobulin therapy (intravenous injections of proteins that the “immune system uses naturally to attack invading organisms”). GBS can affect anybody at any age, but it is an extremely rare condition, affecting about one out of 100,000 individuals in the U.S (“Guillain-Barre Syndrome Fact Sheet”).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fine and gross motor impairments (“Accommodation Ideas for Guillain-Barre Syndrome”)