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Pulmonary Manifestations of Autoimmune Diseases: Early Detection, Phenotypic Patterns, and Prognostic Determinants

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Abstract: Pulmonary involvement is a frequent and clinically significant manifestation of autoimmune diseases, substantially contributing to disease-related morbidity and mortality. Lung damage may develop at any stage of the disease course and often remains subclinical during early phases, leading to delayed diagnosis and unfavorable outcomes. This analytical review summarizes current evidence on pulmonary manifestations associated with autoimmune diseases, with a particular focus on early detection, phenotypic patterns, and prognostic determinants. Key pulmonary phenotypes include interstitial lung disease, airway involvement, pleural manifestations, and pulmonary vascular abnormalities. Advances in high-resolution imaging, pulmonary function testing, serological profiling, and multidisciplinary diagnostic strategies have improved recognition of autoimmune-related pulmonary involvement; however, diagnostic delays remain common. Prognosis is influenced by the extent and pattern of lung involvement, the presence of specific autoantibodies, the rate of functional decline, and associated complications such as pulmonary hypertension and progressive fibrosis. A phenotype-oriented and multidisciplinary approach is essential for timely diagnosis, risk stratification, and optimized management of patients with autoimmune diseases and pulmonary involvement.

Keywords: Autoimmune Diseases, Pulmonary Involvement, Interstitial Lung Disease, Early Detection, Phenotypic Patterns, Diagnostic Strategies, Prognostic Determinants

Introduction

Pulmonary involvement represents one of the most frequent and clinically significant manifestations of autoimmune diseases, substantially contributing to disease burden, functional impairment, and mortality. Immunologic lung disorders arise when the mechanisms of immune self-tolerance fail, leading to persistent activation of innate and adaptive immune responses within the respiratory system. Macrophages and lymphocytes play a central role in the initiation and perpetuation of immune-mediated lung injury. While macrophages function as scavenger and antigen-presenting cells, activated lymphocytes migrate to pulmonary tissues and sustain chronic inflammation, ultimately resulting in structural and functional lung damage [1].

Systemic autoimmune diseases constitute a heterogeneous group of disorders characterized by inappropriate activation of autoreactive $CD4^+$ T cells and autoreactive B cells responsible for pathogenic autoantibody production. Depending on the underlying immunopathological mechanisms, different compartments of the respiratory system may be affected, including the pulmonary parenchyma, airways, pulmonary vasculature, and pleura [2]. Consequently, pulmonary manifestations exhibit a broad phenotypic spectrum, encompassing interstitial lung disease, airway disease, pleural involvement, and pulmonary vascular abnormalities.

One of the major clinical challenges in autoimmune-related lung involvement is the difficulty of early detection. Pulmonary complications often develop insidiously and may remain clinically silent for prolonged periods. In some patients, lung involvement precedes the onset of overt systemic manifestations, emerging as the first or even sole presentation of an underlying autoimmune disorder. This diagnostic complexity is further compounded by the overlapping clinical, radiological, and functional features shared with other forms of interstitial and non-interstitial lung diseases [3].

Accurate and timely identification of autoimmune-associated pulmonary involvement is of paramount importance, as early diagnosis has significant implications for disease prognosis and therapeutic decision-making. Advances in high-resolution imaging, pulmonary function testing, serological profiling, and multidisciplinary diagnostic approaches have improved recognition of these

conditions; however, delays in diagnosis remain common in routine clinical practice [4]. Moreover, the heterogeneity of pulmonary phenotypes across different autoimmune diseases necessitates a phenotype-oriented approach to assessment and management.

In addition to diagnostic challenges, pulmonary involvement is a key determinant of prognosis in autoimmune diseases. The extent and pattern of lung involvement, rate of functional decline, presence of specific autoantibodies, and coexistence of pulmonary hypertension or fibrosis all influence long-term outcomes. Understanding these prognostic determinants is essential for risk stratification, monitoring strategies, and individualized treatment planning [5].

Therefore, this analytical review aims to synthesize current evidence on pulmonary manifestations of autoimmune diseases, with particular emphasis on early detection strategies, phenotypic patterns of lung involvement, and prognostic determinants. By integrating immunopathological mechanisms with clinical and diagnostic perspectives, this work seeks to provide a comprehensive framework to improve recognition, prognostic assessment, and management of autoimmune disease–related pulmonary involvement [6].

Literature Search Strategy

A comprehensive and systematic literature search was conducted to identify contemporary evidence on pulmonary manifestations of autoimmune diseases, with particular emphasis on early detection, phenotypic patterns, and prognostic determinants. The search strategy was developed in accordance with recommendations for narrative and analytical reviews and was designed to capture both clinical and translational studies relevant to autoimmune-related lung involvement [7].

Electronic databases including PubMed/MEDLINE, Scopus, and Web of Science were systematically searched for articles published predominantly over the last 10–15 years, reflecting current concepts and diagnostic approaches in the field. Earlier landmark studies were selectively included when necessary to provide historical context or to support foundational pathophysiological mechanisms [8]. Search terms were constructed using a combination of Medical Subject Headings and free-text keywords, including but not limited to “autoimmune diseases,” “connective tissue diseases,” “pulmonary involvement,” “interstitial lung disease,” “early diagnosis,” “phenotypic patterns,” and “prognostic factors.”

The literature selection process was informed by methodological frameworks proposed in recent review articles by Sambataro and colleagues, who emphasized the importance of integrating pulmonary and rheumatologic perspectives when evaluating autoimmune-associated interstitial lung disease. In addition, recommendations from Fischer and collaborators regarding the classification and assessment of connective tissue disease–associated lung involvement guided the inclusion of studies addressing serological, radiological, and functional phenotypes.

Priority was given to original research articles, multicenter cohort studies, and high-quality narrative or systematic reviews authored by leading experts in the field, including works by Vancheri, Cavagna, Fischer, and Distler, which have significantly contributed to the current understanding of autoimmune-related pulmonary pathology. Case reports and small case series were excluded unless they provided unique insights into rare pulmonary phenotypes or emerging diagnostic concepts.

Methodology

Studies were included if they addressed at least one of the following criteria: early or subclinical detection of pulmonary involvement, phenotypic classification of lung manifestations, prognostic indicators associated with disease progression or mortality, or multidisciplinary diagnostic approaches. Articles focusing exclusively on non-autoimmune interstitial lung diseases or unrelated pulmonary conditions were excluded.

Pulmonary Manifestations in Systemic Lupus Erythematosus

Systemic lupus erythematosus is a prototypical multisystem autoimmune disorder in which pulmonary involvement represents a frequent and clinically relevant manifestation. From a pathophysiological perspective, lung injury in this condition results from immune dysregulation characterized by autoantibody production, immune complex formation, and subsequent tissue

deposition, leading to varying degrees of inflammation and fibrosis. The clinical expression of pulmonary involvement is determined by the balance between these processes and the specific compartments of the respiratory system affected.

In patients with systemic lupus erythematosus, the respiratory system is particularly vulnerable due to widespread immune-mediated injury. Pulmonary manifestations may involve the pleura, pulmonary vasculature, and lung parenchyma. Pleural disease is the most commonly observed presentation and typically manifests as unilateral or bilateral pleural effusions, often accompanied by pericardial effusion. Parenchymal involvement is also frequent and may present with a broad spectrum of radiological and clinical findings.

Infectious complications of the lung are common in systemic lupus erythematosus, particularly in the context of immune dysfunction and immunosuppressive therapy. While bacterial pneumonia accounts for the majority of infectious cases, opportunistic infections occur with increased frequency. Less commonly, pulmonary hemorrhage may develop as a consequence of immune-mediated vascular injury. Chronic fibrotic lung disease is observed less frequently in systemic lupus erythematosus compared with other autoimmune disorders such as rheumatoid arthritis or systemic sclerosis, and when present, fibrosis predominantly affects the peripheral and basal regions of the lungs.

Additional pulmonary manifestations include reduced lung volumes associated with diaphragmatic dysfunction, pulmonary edema, and acute inflammatory processes such as lupus pneumonitis, which remains a relatively rare but severe complication. Interstitial lung disease and pulmonary hypertension may also occur, although they are more frequently associated with other connective tissue diseases. Distinct clinical entities, including the shrinking lung syndrome and episodes of reversible hypoxemia, have been described and further highlight the heterogeneity of pulmonary involvement in systemic lupus erythematosus.

Result and Discussion

Pulmonary Manifestations in Rheumatoid Arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis is a chronic systemic autoimmune disease in which pulmonary involvement represents one of the most serious extra-articular complications and a major contributor to morbidity and mortality. Lung disease in rheumatoid arthritis is considered one of the leading causes of death, surpassed only by infectious complications. Pulmonary involvement may develop at any stage of the disease course and may remain clinically unrecognized until advanced structural damage has occurred.

The spectrum of pulmonary manifestations in rheumatoid arthritis is broad and includes pleural disease, interstitial lung disease, pulmonary nodules, airway involvement, pulmonary vasculitis, alveolar hemorrhage, and infectious complications. Among these, pleural involvement is the most frequently observed manifestation and may be detected in a substantial proportion of patients. Pleural effusions are typically unilateral or bilateral, often persistent, and may lead to significant impairment of pulmonary function [9]. The pleural fluid characteristically exhibits exudative features, including reduced glucose concentration and complement levels, reflecting immune-mediated inflammation.

Parenchymal lung involvement in rheumatoid arthritis commonly manifests as interstitial lung disease, which initially presents with chronic inflammatory changes affecting the alveolar walls and cellular infiltration of the alveolar spaces. Over time, this process may progress to irreversible pulmonary fibrosis, particularly in patients with advanced disease and the presence of subcutaneous rheumatoid nodules. The prognosis associated with rheumatoid arthritis–related interstitial lung disease is generally unfavorable and is a key determinant of long-term outcomes.

Rheumatoid nodules may also develop within the lung parenchyma, appearing as solitary lesions or multiple clustered nodules. These nodules can precede, coincide with, or follow the onset of articular manifestations, further complicating diagnostic evaluation. Vascular involvement, including pulmonary vasculitis, is less common but tends to occur in patients with severe or long-standing disease and may result in life-threatening complications such as alveolar hemorrhage, presenting with hemoptysis, diffuse pulmonary infiltrates, and anemia.

Airway disease is another important component of pulmonary involvement in rheumatoid arthritis. Functional studies frequently demonstrate airflow obstruction, with reductions in peak expiratory flow

rates and an increased prevalence of chronic bronchitis and bronchiectasis. In addition, pulmonary manifestations may arise as adverse effects of disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs and other therapeutic agents, necessitating careful differentiation between disease-related and treatment-induced lung injury.

Given the heterogeneity and clinical impact of pulmonary involvement in rheumatoid arthritis, systematic evaluation of respiratory symptoms and regular pulmonary assessment are essential components of comprehensive patient management. Early recognition of lung involvement is critical for timely intervention, optimization of therapy, and improvement of prognosis [10].

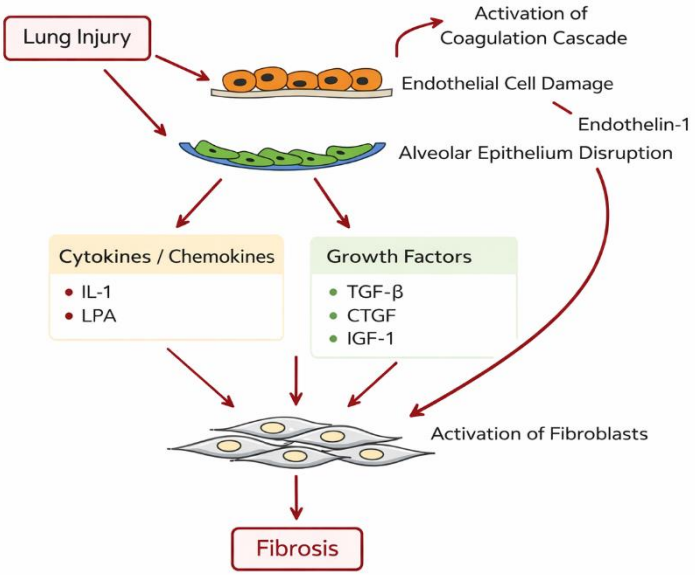

Figure 1. Pathophysiological Mechanisms Underlying Autoimmune-Related Pulmonary Fibrosis

Early Detection and Diagnostic Strategies

Early detection of pulmonary involvement in autoimmune diseases relies on the prompt recognition of clinical features that may indicate an underlying systemic immune disorder. Clinical signs often provide the first diagnostic clues; however, their correct interpretation frequently requires confirmation by specialists with rheumatologic expertise. Given that pulmonary manifestations may precede overt systemic disease, careful clinical evaluation plays a critical role in identifying patients who warrant further diagnostic investigation for autoimmune-related lung involvement.

Clinical Indicators of Autoimmune-Related Pulmonary Involvement

Musculoskeletal symptoms represent some of the most common early clinical indicators associated with autoimmune diseases complicated by interstitial lung disease. Inflammatory arthritis is characterized by joint pain, swelling, and stiffness, with symptoms typically worsening at rest and during the early morning hours and improving with physical activity. Prolonged morning stiffness exceeding 30 minutes is a key feature distinguishing inflammatory arthritis from degenerative joint disease. Although arthritis is most frequently associated with rheumatoid arthritis, it is also observed in a significant proportion of patients with Sjögren syndrome, systemic sclerosis, and antisynthetase syndrome. The presence of inflammatory arthritis or persistent arthralgia should therefore prompt a comprehensive diagnostic assessment aimed at identifying possible secondary pulmonary involvement.

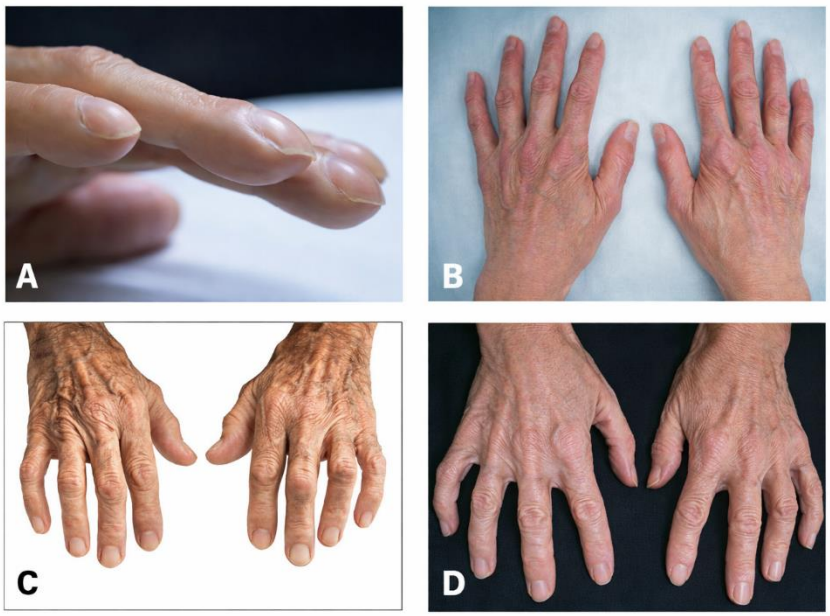

Figure 2. Representative peripheral clinical manifestations associated with autoimmune diseases and interstitial lung involvement, including (A) finger clubbing, (B) sclerodactyly, (C) rheumatoid arthritis–related joint deformities, and (D) muscle atrophy.

Isolated arthralgia represents a non-specific but clinically relevant symptom that may precede the development of overt inflammatory arthritis. The concept of clinically suspect arthralgia has been introduced to identify patients at increased risk of progression toward rheumatoid arthritis . Specific features, including recent onset of symptoms, involvement of small joints of the hands, prolonged morning stiffness, and a positive family history, have been shown to possess high diagnostic accuracy. Recognition of these features is essential for early referral and timely pulmonary evaluation.

Extra-articular clinical manifestations further contribute to early diagnostic suspicion. Sicca symptoms, including xerophthalmia and xerostomia, are frequently reported in patients with connective tissue diseases and may precede or occur independently of pulmonary symptoms. Salivary gland enlargement, particularly parotid swelling, may anticipate the onset of Sjögren syndrome by several years and has diagnostic as well as prognostic implications. Importantly, a substantial proportion of patients with Sjögren syndrome–associated interstitial lung disease do not exhibit sicca symptoms at disease onset, underscoring the need for vigilance when glandular abnormalities are present.

Vascular and cutaneous manifestations also play a pivotal role in early detection strategies. Raynaud's phenomenon is a common clinical feature in several autoimmune diseases and may precede pulmonary involvement by many years [11]. Secondary Raynaud's phenomenon, particularly when associated with digital ulcers, pitting scars, or skin sclerosis, strongly suggests an underlying connective tissue disease. Nailfold videocapillaroscopy and autoantibody profiling are essential tools for differentiating primary from secondary Raynaud's phenomenon and for identifying patients at high risk of pulmonary complications.

Integrated Diagnostic Approach

Early detection of autoimmune-related pulmonary involvement requires an integrated diagnostic strategy combining clinical assessment with laboratory and instrumental investigations. The presence of characteristic clinical signs should prompt further evaluation using high-resolution computed tomography, pulmonary function testing, and targeted serological analysis [12]. Multidisciplinary collaboration between pulmonologists, rheumatologists, radiologists, and immunologists is essential to ensure accurate diagnosis, particularly in patients with subtle or overlapping clinical presentations.

Laboratory Exams

Laboratory investigations play a pivotal role in the diagnostic evaluation of interstitial lung disease associated with autoimmune disorders, particularly in patients presenting with subtle or atypical clinical features. While laboratory findings alone are rarely diagnostic, they provide essential complementary

information that supports clinical suspicion, guides further diagnostic work-up, and contributes to disease stratification. In the context of autoimmune-related pulmonary involvement, laboratory examinations are broadly categorized into general inflammatory markers and disease-specific immunological assays [13].

General laboratory tests, including markers of systemic inflammation such as C-reactive protein and erythrocyte sedimentation rate, are frequently elevated in autoimmune diseases and may reflect ongoing inflammatory activity. Although these parameters lack specificity, persistent elevation may raise suspicion for an underlying immune-mediated process, particularly when correlated with compatible clinical and radiological findings [14]. Additional routine tests, including complete blood count and basic metabolic panels, may reveal anemia of chronic disease, leukopenia, or thrombocytopenia, which are commonly associated with systemic autoimmune conditions.

Autoimmune-specific laboratory evaluations represent a cornerstone of diagnostic assessment in patients with suspected autoimmune-associated interstitial lung disease. Serological testing for antinuclear antibodies remains a fundamental screening tool, given its high sensitivity across a broad spectrum of connective tissue diseases. The identification of specific autoantibodies, such as anti–topoisomerase I, anti–cyclic citrullinated peptide, anti–Ro/SSA, anti–La/SSB, and antisynthetase antibodies, provides valuable diagnostic and prognostic information. These biomarkers are frequently associated with distinct pulmonary phenotypes and may precede the development of overt systemic manifestations [15].

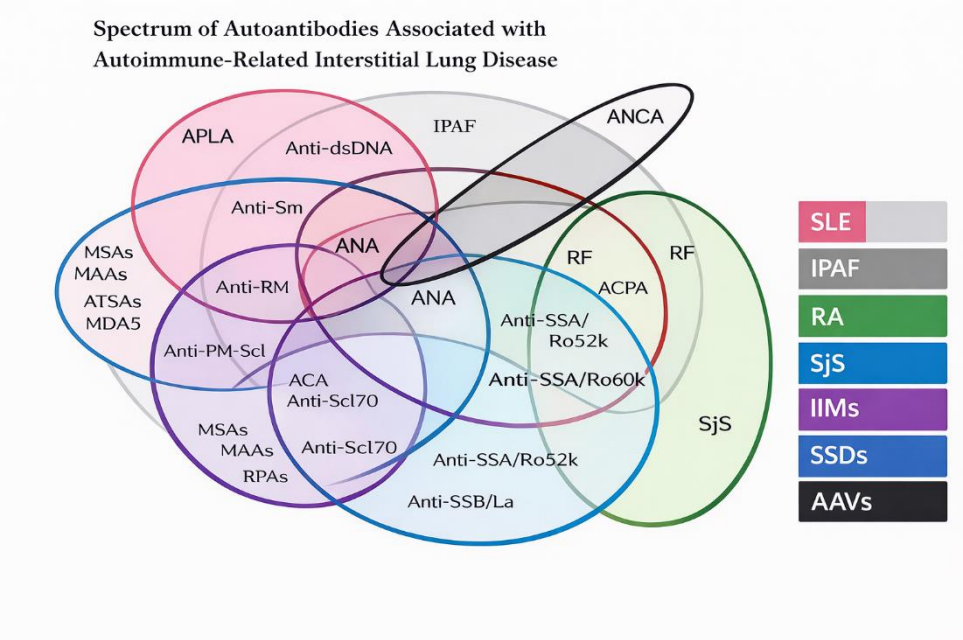

Figure 4. Schematic overview of the distribution and overlap of autoantibodies associated with autoimmune-related interstitial lung disease across major connective tissue disease phenotypes.

In addition to their diagnostic value, autoantibody profiles contribute to prognostic assessment and clinical decision-making. Certain autoantibodies have been linked to an increased risk of progressive interstitial lung disease, rapid functional decline, or the development of pulmonary hypertension [16]. Consequently, serological findings should be interpreted within an integrated clinical framework that includes symptom assessment, imaging studies, and pulmonary function testing.

Diagnostic Strategies

The diagnosis of autoimmune-related pulmonary involvement requires an integrated approach combining clinical evaluation, laboratory testing, imaging, and functional assessment. Due to the heterogeneous presentation of autoimmune diseases, isolated diagnostic tools are insufficient, and a stepwise strategy is essential for accurate identification.

Clinical suspicion should arise in patients with unexplained respiratory symptoms or interstitial

lung disease accompanied by systemic or extra-pulmonary features suggestive of autoimmune pathology [17]. High-resolution computed tomography is central to detecting and characterizing pulmonary abnormalities, while pulmonary function tests provide objective evaluation of disease severity and progression.

Serological testing supports diagnostic stratification by identifying autoimmune markers associated with specific pulmonary phenotypes. These findings must be interpreted in conjunction with clinical and radiological data [16]. Multidisciplinary collaboration remains the cornerstone of effective diagnostic strategies, improving diagnostic accuracy and guiding appropriate management decisions.

Conclusion

Pulmonary involvement is a common and clinically significant manifestation of autoimmune diseases, substantially contributing to morbidity and mortality. The wide spectrum of pulmonary phenotypes and the frequent subclinical onset of lung involvement pose major diagnostic challenges and often result in delayed recognition.

Early detection, supported by careful clinical assessment, advanced imaging techniques, pulmonary function testing, and serological profiling, is essential for accurate diagnosis and improved patient outcomes. A multidisciplinary, phenotype-oriented diagnostic approach enhances diagnostic confidence and facilitates timely intervention.

Prognosis is largely determined by the pattern and severity of lung involvement, the presence of specific autoantibodies, and the development of complications such as pulmonary hypertension or progressive fibrosis. Improved awareness and systematic evaluation of pulmonary manifestations remain crucial for optimizing management strategies in patients with autoimmune diseases.

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