



## Reverse Autoimmune Disease Summit

### Dr. Keesha Ewers Interviews Dr. Connie Jeon

**Dr. Keesha:** Welcome back to the reverse autoimmune disease summit everybody! I'm Dr. Keesha Ewers and I'm pleased to introduce you to Dr. Connie Jeon, who is a lupus patient for over 19 years. She's been living with lupus and it's taught her that healing is an inside job. No matter how well trained the doctor might be, they can only offer medications to treat the disease rather than promoting health if they're in that conventional, American model. She's a holistic doctor who specializes in treating autoimmune diseases. Specifically, lupus, by applying: Functional medicine, Ayurvedic medicine, Traditional Chinese medicine, physical and nutrition therapy, yoga and meditation, to successfully help her clients to reverse their disease. She's the founder of Alkaline Wellness Center where she practices what she preaches by offering daily yoga and nutrition therapy, Functional medicine and physical therapy services to the greater Atlanta, Georgia region. She's also the founder of Lupus Rebel where she shares holistic treatments to help lupus patients reverse and heal their disease. She created the Alkaline method as a blueprint to use food as medicine, movement as medicine, and mindfulness as medicine. Her unique ability to make complex issues simple and easy is her gift to her patients and those that she serves. Welcome to the summit, Connie.

**Connie:** Hi. Thank you for having me.

**Dr. Keesha:** Yeah, we were talking before we started recording about our very similar paths to having to look outside of the box that we were trained in. So, I usually start every one of these interviews off with, let's hear that story for you because a lot of our people that are listening to the summit are in a similar situation where they're frustrated, they're looking to their insurance company to pay for whatever it is that they need to heal, they're tired of having the side effects of medications and being told that this is the lifetime issue they're going to have forever and ever. I love to share the stories of the people whom figured out a different way to heal ourselves, so if you don't mind sharing your story, I would love to hear it.

**Dr. Connie:** Yeah, I have always been a health fanatic, ever since I was in high school. I studied psychology as my Bachelor's degree, studied nutrition for my Master's, and it wasn't until I was in doctoral level studies, in my physical therapy last year, I started to lose a lot of weight and I started to feel a lot of fatigue, like overwhelming fatigue as well as rash all over. It was really, really disheartening for a young woman because I felt deformed at that time. I had to take two months out of the semester to get my health in check. I was living in what's called the Blue Zone, which is where the most centenarians

live and I felt like I adopted the healthy vegan way Loma Linda teaches you, I thought I had a good balance of spiritual life as well as exercise, but I always felt tired. I was vegan for a long time. Anyway, I went in and out of the hospital emergency visits. It was very embarrassing for, I don't know if you agree with me on this, but as somebody who studies conventional medicine, it's really shameful almost. I felt ashamed that I was sick and in and out of the hospital, looking at all my medical doctor friends and people who I went to school with treat me like, I, didn't know what was wrong with me.

Dr. Connie: So anyway, medications after medications, in and out of the hospital for mysterious reasons; my chiropractic brother at the time said, "You know, I think you might have lupus, so let's do a lupus panel." This was after about eight months of only addressing my rashes with corticosteroids and still having no answers. Dermatology, infectious disease, cardiology, I had the full lab workup, but nobody really knew. When my brother did the labs, everything came back positive. The ANA was positive and I don't even remember to what full extent he did the labs, but with whatever I had, I went to my rheumatologists and so began my journey. Everything he said was Bible to me and at that time we didn't have internet, so there was no information on lupus. I was forced to go to the library at Loma Linda University to figure out, and everything I read was so scary, like these patients that were dying and all kinds of issues with it. I didn't know what to make of it, but all I knew was I needed to heal and that was what I was going to do, so I went to Traditional Chinese medicine when my rheumatologist, I saw him for about a year, only offered me is dosing of the corticosteroids, which I thought the side effects were even scarier and I didn't want to be that person. Then, at that time I think I sort of, in my mind, rejected lupus as a disease because it was, again, it was shameful for me that I had something. Even going to the doctors on a routine basis and getting the labs drawn, I could not believe, like as healthy as I was, that I was having to go to the doctors every three months, that was just a block in my head.

Dr. Connie: Then, I went to the Traditional Chinese medical doctor because he claimed to, he said, "heal lupus" and reverse it. On the first go round, he measured my pulse and said, "You know, what kind of diet are you on?" I told him, I'm a vegan and that I eat really healthy and he said, "You know, for your body type, you need to eat meat, not just any meat, but red meat" and he said, "You can absolutely get this better because here's what's wrong with you..." He explained to me about the organs and Meridian channels, how some systems (at that time, it was a mystery to me) were not optimal and some places were energetically so low, no wonder why you're sick. For me, when he told me he can reverse it, I was like, "Oh my gosh, all in, if you can fix me, fix me." Reluctantly, I did introduce meat into my diet because I was so fatigued and it did resolve my fatigue in a big way. He didn't go any deeper than that, other than give me bags and bags of herbal tinctures that I had no idea of what was in them and my rheumatologist didn't know. All I knew was after six months of being on it, my ANA's came back negative. I was like "Hallelujah to that" and I was a bad girl, a rebel, that's why I call myself the 'Lupus Rebel' because every time I would go to the rheumatologist, he said corticosteroids and plaquenil were my insurance and that I needed to be on it, one step ahead of the game and that I'll always have lupus.

Dr. Connie: So again, treating me like a sick person and I was again resisting the diagnoses all together. Do you know what I mean? It was like a conflict of interest. I couldn't get myself to tell him I was doing herbal medicine and for six months I did that. But despite the fact that my labs came back normal, he still wanted me, because he attributed all that to his corticosteroid treatment to calm my lupus. Then, that started my whole thinking process of "Oh my gosh, they don't know what they're treating." That led me to have a baby and after the baby, my first son was born in 2003 and that's when it became really serious for me because when he was about 15 months old, I had gained about 15 pounds in about two weeks and it was a lot of pitting edema. Pitting edema means a lot of retention of water and when you can make a dent in your skin because you're retaining so much water. It was becoming very uncomfortable, I remember getting a massage face down because I was in so much pain and just standing up you could see my eyes would be so bloated because I had kidney issues and that scared me. I went to my rheumatologist at the time and she looked at me and got really scared after she looked at my urinalysis and said, "You've got to go to a nephrologist. I think this is affecting your kidneys."

Dr. Connie: I went to the nephrologist and the nephrologist said, "You need to be admitted ASAP for a kidney biopsy" because my counts were so high, 9,000 plus protein in my urine. I was spilling out protein like nobody's business and they thought this can be so bad. And so that started my organ involvement. After that I needed to do kidney, like chemo. It came back stage four for glomerulonephritis. And so that meant up to that point, everything was skin, which is the lupus that you want despite the cosmetic effects of it, which were more important to me at the time. Now, it affected my kidneys and now he said I needed to be on chemotherapy once a month for twelve months, at that time it was the protocol.

Dr. Connie: Then, I was going to be discharged with CellCept and corticosteroids for however long. I didn't like that and of course, that's when I started to look into Functional medicine and the movement because I realized how weak I was getting. I was gaining a lot of weight and had to be on Prednisone, so Moonphase all the works, and my labs were going haywire with the cholesterol going up, my glucose levels going all over the map. I thought this is not the answer, I got to do something so I started to move and at that time it was pilates. Been studying Functional medicine, but I was just not ready for it because I wanted a second baby. By about year three, I was able to taper off of most of the medication and I gave myself another year to recover myself. Then, I decided I wanted another baby and my nephrologist said, "No way because that's what flares you up, you should not have any more babies." But I had another baby and everything was fine until he was about eight months old and I had a second flare with the lupus nephritis. And so that kind of sent me off again. After that, is when I really delved into Functional medicine.

Dr. Keesha: I wanted to tell everyone what I call this. I want everyone to hear your story really well because you're like, "Okay, I wasn't quite ready to go all the way in," that's called misery to motivation ratio. I talk about it in my book, Solving the Autoimmune Puzzle. The more miserable you are, the more motivated you are, right? To actually do everything that it takes. So you have to look inside of yourselves as you're listening and find your own

misery to motivation ratio and don't let it get to kidney failure. Right? This is how we all are, I was the same way like I had to get to the point where I could not get out of bed. Nothing that I took would actually help me continue to go and I was like, "Oh, do I need to do something differently?" It's a really interesting thing about human nature, right? It's a lot of work to make these changes. So, your child was eight months old and now you decided to dive all the way in and let's hear what happened.

Dr. Connie: Yeah, I went to a Functional medical doctor to try it. At the time, my marriage was failing and I had a business, it was just really stressful times. I went to a Functional medical doctor and she did some labs on me, \$3,000 worth of labs, and after that all I was told I had MTHFR SNP (single-nucleotide polymorphism) and then she said, "You need some hormones." Because my thing was libido was suffering, so my marriage was not so good and I was not feeling good. When she just discharged me with progesterone and that's about it, there was really no sense of all those labs. She wasn't really a Functional medicine doctor, I think she was more holistic-minded and that's what I needed. Then, that set me off to learning all about MTHFR and that's when I got introduced to Functional medicine at Institute for Functional Medicine. That intrigued me, so that's the path that I chose. I really felt like this was a lifestyle intervention. To be honest, at that time, I wasn't getting a whole lot of that part of it, but I got curious. I'm like, "this can heal me." So I wanted to know more, that's why I decided I'm going to go study this and see what this all means with the labs because it wasn't clear to me. It was very overwhelming and confusing. With that information, I enrolled myself into Institute for Functional Medicine and gave myself a long time to do that. Despite the fact that I did the nutritionals and so forth, my marriage had failed and I was at the brink of divorce.

Dr. Connie: I had my third relapse, same thing, glomerulonephritis. That was in 2012 and I had gone through maybe two modules in Institute for Functional Medicine. After the divorce is when I said, "You know what? All or die, three strikes you're out. This is the last one that I'll have." So, I just went all in and I think in 2017 is when I got, IFMCP board-certified after finishing everything and applied everything to me. I get flares every four years now, it's been seven years and I have no flares. But another thing that I want to tell you is one of the things that happened to me this year was I have this nice, amazing yoga studio and I was so stressed, I suppose. All of this to say... Dr. Ewers, right? That's how you say your last name? So I mean, you're a psychotherapist, so you understand the power of your mind and the stress, the intangibility of the stress factor that really creates and perpetuates that sickness. Right? Anyway, probably starting in April, I told you I had three strikes and you're out.

Dr. Connie: I changed my rheumatologist, maybe, two years ago in 2017. When I went to him, he was so adamant that I get back on Plaquinel and I was on no medications at the time. He was adamant that I get back on Plaquinel, so I've had been taking 200 milligrams BID. It's the least invasive medication known to lupus, it's like a vitamin pill. Right? I took it for two years, we measured therapeutically through this testing called Avisa. Are you familiar with that testing? It's the gold standard for lupus diagnosis, it measures the therapeutic dose of Plaquinel but I remember it was always sub-threshold so I knew he

thought that I wasn't complying. I really was complying, for awhile, because I didn't want the third relapse and if that was all I needed to take, that was a good thing.

Dr. Connie: In April, I had this strange bout with severe fatigue and it was a flu-like symptom. I had a very emotionally, traumatic event happen with my mom, in a way that it stirred me up and sent me off for about two months. I got really sick and I thought "it's the flu, it's the flu." I started to get the malar rash, went to my rheumatologist and he gave me Z-Pak. He said, it's a Lupus flare, so go home." Though, if you look at my labs, my platelets were dropping: white blood count, red blood count, everything was trending down. Pancytopenia. Then, I kept conversing with them back and forth and he kept saying, "Oh, just hold it off, hold it off, keep taking those medications, you should be fine," and my fever would just keep spiking up. After four weeks, I thought "This is not right," so I actually told my rheumatologists, "I'm going to go to the emergency room." I went to the emergency room and I had 0.2 white blood count with a fever so high. The emergency doctor tested me and I had 0.1 neutrophils, [Laughs] that was neutropenic, like danger zone. He said, "I hate to admit you because this is the worst place for you to be, but I have to admit you". Then, they did a blood culture and I had staph infection in my blood. So, I don't know what came first: the stress level that shot my immune system down or what? I was still taking Plaquinel because they told the hospitalists that's what I was on. The new rheumatologists, the hospitalist, came in to see me...

Dr. Connie: By about day three, when nothing was responding: no antibiotics were responding and my fever was not going down. I thought, "You know, I'm going to die." They did bone marrow biopsy, at this time it was leukemia and aplastic anemia. It was bad news. Right? And so I had to call all my family members to tell them this might be the worst thing ever. I had that scare and my rheumatologist, the hospitalist, came to visit me that night and he said, "You know what, Connie, I think it might be the Plaquinel because..." Lupus. Nobody checked for lupus, but that's the mysterious thing. Everybody assumed that might be over everything, but he came in and he said, "Let's stop your Plaquinel because I found some research, less than 5% people can have this thing." But I've had Plaquinel off and on for 19 years, so for me to have sensitivity to that, I'm like "Alright, I'll stop. That's fine." I stopped it and the next day my white blood count started to come up. Everybody...My infectious disease doctor...I was in an oncology unit because they for sure that it was cancer of some sort. My infectious disease doctors finally found the antibiotic that responded to keep my fever down, but my white count didn't really budge much until we stopped the Plaquinel.

Dr. Connie: So, I was in the hospital for nine days and from just stopping the Plaquinel I was fully back; and I've been tested (like I had to go home with a port in my vein for my antibiotic treatment, for the staph, but other than that), they checked my lupus serology three times. My rheumatologist was so eager to put me back on what's called Benlysta and corticosteroids, maybe, to keep my counts up. I said, "You know what? Immune suppression was what I was struggling with in the hospital. I really am not ready for anything else. Let my body heal." This got me on my functional medicine protocol. I've been back to see the rheumatologists twice and my lupus is completely normal. I don't even have ANA, so this whole time it wasn't even lupus, but they were addressing it with so many corticosteroids. I mean, I was pumped full of stuff in the hospital. All that

to say, there's a lot we don't know. Even having been through the functional medicine, there's so much I don't know and understand. I can sit with my patients and go into the rabbit hole about what biochemical pathway is and feel like I'm so smart, but all that intelligent knowledge, linear knowledge that I've learned made me realize just how miraculous our bodies are.

Dr. Connie: But the thought process of, if my mind leaves me and if I feel victim to this disease and say "I have lupus" and therefore... (Lupus patients, if you're listening, please listen, or rheumatoid arthritis) I'm on disability and I have this disease I have to maintain. It's like we almost protect that disease and we identify with it so much that it becomes part of you. I see people in perpetual cycles of being sick, so I call this the habit of being sick, right? I think that's what you have to question first. If you want to get better, you can get better and you can reverse it. I blog a lot on 'Lupus Rebel' and it's amazing to me how many nay-sayers say to me it's not curable and that I'm such a hoax for saying that because I don't look sick but they don't realize where I come from. If you guys are listening, I think of all the people that's been sick that I've gotten to know over the years, I've been pretty sick you guys. There's no hiding that. There's pictures of me in the hospital that I share on my blog, so you guys have to see where I come from. Your biggest asset in medicine is all within us, right? That's why the healing is an inside job because if that switch doesn't go off, then you're going to be subject to an external factor dictating exactly what's going to happen for you and your outcome of the disease. If you ask your rheumatologist, they are going to tell you that you'll never get rid of lupus because it's an incurable disease and if you believe that, then guess what? You're going to be protecting lupus for the rest of your life. What do you think about that, Dr. Ewers?

Dr. Keesha: You know I get on the stages at the Institute for Functional Medicine and I teach this from stage and I tell my story. "Look you guys, I reversed my rheumatoid arthritis 25 years ago and it's not been bad. I did it in six months because I learned all of this stuff really quickly that it's not my RA. RA doesn't have me, right? And so I need to make sure that I treat it as an imbalance." I found out Ayurvedic medicine really fast and then I discovered Functional medicine is like, Ayurvedic in English. One of the things that Ayurvedic taught me really early and I just give so much grace for that gratitude is that autoimmune disease is undigested anger and when I really, really started thinking that through I went "Oh my gosh." I started trying to find all the places in my life where I should have been angry but didn't allow myself to be angry, like sexual abuse in my childhood, all these different things I went through and I started really healing them and that right there..(Yes, I changed my diet to a degree and I did some other things, but that didn't reverse my disease), actually healing how I manage my stress, my relations, having boundaries, healing trauma, that reversed my disease. So things like bacteria, you had a staph infection, it's trauma and stress and it's your digestive health. I took all of those and worked on them together. So it's definitely true like you can see in each of your flares there was big stress happening. Right? Child birth and getting up in the middle of the night for months on end is really stressful. [Laughs] Then, having big drama with a parent, and divorce, like these are all big time stressors.

Dr. Connie: Yeah, I do hope this recording does go because it's really skimpy. I hear you and then I don't hear you.

Dr. Keesha: In a second, I'm going to start the recording again. So, let's talk a little bit about what this has to do with your acid-base balance because one of the things that we know about stress, about antibiotics, about steroid use, all these things, right? When your kidneys don't work, you can't get rid of ammonia, all of this increases your acidity and you talk about an alkaline blueprint. Let's talk a little bit about that. How does this help heal you?

Dr. Connie: So, if you can imagine a horizontal line of the left side being more acidic and then right side being more alkaline, as we know physiologically, we've got chemicals within us that are highly acidic and then we've got chemicals within us that's highly alkaline. It's like yin and yang, right? We need both. Our body does a phenomenal job of keeping a balance in the middle. The optimal pH range is very narrow, right? We know that, so when I talk about alkalizing, it's sort of like tipping your threshold to be more alkaline means and getting away from all the acid forming habits. Some foods we both know, a lot of sugar-ridden, processed foods that are man-made are more acidic and more of the earth nature, like fruits and vegetables are more alkalizing. So, I talk about it in that context and I get a lot of questions about, "Oh, Dr. Connie, does that mean, do you believe in alkaline water?" [Laughs] I used to believe a lot of those hoaxes because there used to be Japanese... I'm Asian, I'm Korean by descent, so there was a lot of that going around in my culture at the time. What I learned is that alkaline water is really hard to maintain. When you get exposure into the air, it's going to go right back to being a slightly acidic. You know what I mean? When you say alkalizing water, you have to think about how you're always having to tip it towards the alkaline by what you do, not, "Oh, by drinking this alkaline water because it says alkaline you're going to become alkalizing." That's not going to happen. But also understanding that sometimes when we're sick and taking medications, that's a little bit more acid forming.

Dr. Connie: Like you said, our kidneys have to work a lot harder and there's a biotransformative processes that go on biochemically to really alter it. And by your kidneys working and your liver working harder, your body's able to keep it at an optimal pH balance. Sometimes, if it gets less acidic, our body has a way of balancing that by pulling bicarbonates from your bones too, to make it more alkaline. Knowing that, that there's always checks and balances that you want to help your body to have good thoughts, to have more of an alkalizing effect, as well as eating the good foods to have an alkalizing effect, and knowing, even when we talk about the exercise part, it seems so counterintuitive when I ask my patients to move because they're in so much pain. We're in catabolism, right? We're so acidic that it aches to move, but the truth is the gentle movements of balanced, well balanced movement...Like that's why I love yoga so much, will create and help your liver, your kidneys, all your metabolic systems work efficiently. If you can really move some of the waste products that tend to reside in our big joints and small joints in our fingers, all that with movement, we can help it to be flushed out. So, that's what I mean by alkalizing effects or the alkaline movements are alkaline foods. Even alkaline thinking is positive to negative. What are you creating? Because like you said, if you're undigested and if you're not feeling the anger, it's going to go somewhere

to have an acidic effect. The key is to learn to feel those feelings because in life, anger and happiness are two sides of the same coin, right? We're going to have both. We have the yin and yang. We have acid and alkaline.

Dr. Connie: It's understanding that we have both sides and learning to feel them in our body, so we don't hold onto those feelings. I think this is key because like you said, I meet so many lupus patients, like 100% of them, including myself, has had some form of childhood trauma that we tend to hold onto and that's become our basis for how we live our lives. Whether it be from a place of guarding, from a place of fear or sometimes undigested anger, however that manifests, we perpetuate the same thing. We perpetuate the same thing by picking partners that are not really good for us, but we let outside world dictate what we are. What I usually say, healing happens on the inside because through Ayurvedic medicine, Ayurvedic and yoga go hand in hand together. As you know, if you place the focus inward and learn to really trust your gut and trust and honor your body.. and really at the end of the day, it's the self-love. If you can cultivate more of that to honor yourself because at the basis of everybody, there is this self-loathing that happens for all the things, shameful things that happen to us, the anger, somebody's abuse or sexual abuse or any kind of wrongful relationships, or abandonment, whatever that might look like, and then we have a traumatic something Epstein-Barr or some viral infection or something that'll trigger that to all come forth and manifest as disease. Don't you think that that's true?

Dr. Keesha: Oh yes. This whole summit has been about that. It's exactly what I see in my practice and in my own life for sure. It's how I help people reverse their illness is doing these sort of deeper mersion trauma healing retreats to get to this stuff because that's what makes your body hospitable for your Epstein-Barr to come in flare or your staph infection or lyme, whatever place for these organisms to thrive. So, it's really important that we start here because this is what actually sets off the biochemistry that tells the body what to do next. If it's "danger, danger" then you're going to have a whole set of chemicals being released to say "We need to get out of danger" as opposed to rest and digest. It's all about how we perceive neuroception and perception, how we see ourselves in the world and then how we see ourselves. That has to be adjusted if you're going to get true reversal. That's on that scale of acidity to alkalinity. I love that. I always am telling people to try really hard not to go down the rabbit hole. I say those words too of chasing each little biochemical data point. That brings us to pH testing, do you do that? Do you believe in it?

Dr. Connie: Well, as you know, throughout the day your pH strip readings will vary. Though, I think so much of our Western medicine wants tangible evidence of something. I used to have pH strips that I would measure just for the sake of measuring because I was curious myself, but I realized they weren't 100% reliable and I didn't want them to be stuck on this pH scale that can vary, right? At the end of the day, in most cases you're, depending on what you measure, like is it saliva? Is it the urine? What do you want to measure? Because I did this a lot with my nephrologist, every time I would go, he would measure my pH and he would tell me like, "Oh, you don't have to worry about it. I think you're okay with the protein count. It's just one plus or whatever." That really kind of made me think about and have a conversation with them about how accurate that is. He said, it's

not accurate. It's what you want to extrapolate from that is your own to keep. So, I measured mine throughout the day and then I measured mine throughout the week and then I realized there's such a variability that it didn't really justify why I was measuring anything. So, I stopped doing that and that's why I come to, it's not the specific number. Even the hormones, if you were to measure me serologically right now, it'll look very different tomorrow. It really depends on what emotional state I am in, what space am I in, am I stressed or not, have I slept last night or not? What kinds of foods I have ate? It's just so many variables that it's just not worth measuring, so it's not something that I measure on a regular basis. Not with my patients.

Dr. Keesha: Oh, that's so helpful because I always say "test, don't guess" because I want people that have autoimmune disease. Every single person with autoimmune disease has a lot of pitta in them. I've noticed that they're perfectionists, people pleasers and they hold on to the past poison of pain from before and there's a lot of pitta in that and so that means there's a lot of [inaudible] I need the data. So, I love to do testing, I love to do genetics, so that we have benchmarking tools. But then I always say, "And then we can't be making this the only part of it." The other part is connecting the dots between what you see in your labs and how you're behaving and your lifestyle choices, which includes what you're thinking every single second of the day and how you're processing and digesting your feelings, your beliefs, your emotion to your memories. That is a big part of it and so that will actually create the data, not the data is creating you. I think that's a big distinction that a lot of people don't understand. So, I appreciate you and your story and what you're doing in the world. Do you have any other last words that you want to share before we sign off?

Dr. Connie: I guess I want people to realize, especially in the autoimmune community, that it's not all about the food. Like food doesn't make you, cause I usually say, you can be drinking a nice organic kale juice in the morning and you're erradic because you just had a fight with your husband and you're stressed to the max and you're going to drink this kale juice. What effect will that have? versus if you're so joyful and if you are like just full of gratitude, enjoying like a hamburger for example, you have to think about how we process that information all depends on your thinking and your emotions and just really cultivating and recognizing those feelings I think is key in getting better. And yes, you can absolutely get better. You can reverse your conditions, but if you, as long as you defend it, you'll never get well. So ask yourself, if you really want to get well, look at your life. Are you satisfied with where you are? If you're not, and if you keep perpetually going into this hamster wheel, then perhaps it's time to rethink how you're thinking about your disease and really being honest with yourself because it's a self-exploration, don't you think?

Dr. Keesha: Absolutely.

Dr. Connie: Huge part of that. Yeah.

Dr. Keesha: Thank you, Dr. Connie. Alright, everybody, until next time.