

MEDfacts

An Educational Health Series From National Jewish Health®



Systemic Lupus Erythematosus

Systemic lupus erythematosus, often just called lupus, is a chronic disease that can affect almost any part of the body. People with mild lupus may only have skin rashes and/or joint pain. In more severe lupus, important organs like the kidneys, heart, blood vessels, lungs, gastrointestinal tract, and brain can be involved. Any two people with lupus may have different symptoms or manifestations. They may also have different lengths of time when the disease is active or in remission. While lupus cannot be cured, your health care provider can help you control symptoms.

What Happens in the Body?

Lupus symptoms are caused by an overly active immune system. Normally the immune system protects us by attacking bacteria, viruses and other cells recognized as foreign and harmful to the body. But in lupus, the immune system mistakenly attacks healthy cells and tissue. Lupus is called an **autoimmune disorder**. This is because the immune system attacks “self”. Auto means self. The reasons for these mistakes by the immune system are not completely understood. There are medicines that can help inhibit your immune system from causing inflammation and damage.

Why Does a Person Get Lupus?

The latest estimates are that 1.5 million people in the United States have lupus or one in one thousand. Ninety percent of them are women, usually in child bearing years. Most cases of lupus are diagnosed in women between the ages of 12 and 40. Non-Caucasians are 2-3 times more likely to have lupus than are Caucasians.

It is difficult to know exactly what causes a person to develop lupus. Some people are born with a genetic predisposition to lupus. This means that people with a family member with autoimmune disease are more likely to develop one. Exposures in the environment may cause a “trigger” which causes lupus to become active. Environmental triggers are thought to include viral

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infections, exposure to silica dust, sun exposure, various medications and hormones, especially estrogen. Estrogen is thought to be an important trigger for the development of lupus. This may be why women develop this condition more readily than men and during reproductive years. Researchers are working hard to determine the cause or causes of lupus.

How is Lupus Diagnosed?

Many people with lupus feel frustrated and angry because they have been ill for months or even years before they are told they have lupus. It is often difficult to diagnose lupus early in the disease. Lupus symptoms are similar to those of other diseases and can come and go even without treatment.

In order to participate in a clinical trial for lupus, a diagnosis of lupus must be made via the American College of Rheumatology criteria. This means that 4 or more of the following 11 signs and symptoms must occur:

- Rash over the cheeks (malar or butterfly rash),
- Round raised patches (discoid rash),
- Sensitivity to the sun or other ultraviolet light,
- Ulcers or sores in the mouth,
- Pain and swelling in joints,
- Inflammation around the lungs, heart or abdomen,
- Kidney inflammation,
- Problems in the nervous system such as seizures, strokes or psychosis,
- Abnormalities in the blood like low blood counts,
- Abnormalities in the immune system that are determined by blood tests or
- Antinuclear antibodies (ANA) in the blood.

The diagnosis of another type of lupus, Discoid lupus, can be made when a person only has a patchy, round, discoid rash, and no other symptoms. Blood tests and a skin biopsy are helpful in making this diagnosis. People with discoid lupus may or may not progress to systemic lupus erythematosus.

How Can Symptoms be Managed?

The goal of treatment is to relieve pain, control inflammation and prevent damage to vital organs. Medications are very helpful and are prescribed depending on the severity of symptoms and the organs that are involved. Lifestyle changes can also help decrease symptoms. These changes can include getting extra rest during a flare, reducing stress and avoiding sun exposure. Medicines and lifestyle changes can control the lupus symptoms in most people.

What is the Role of National Jewish Health?

National Jewish Health is one of the world's leaders in the study and management of immune diseases, such as lupus. Our health care providers have vast experience in treating people with lupus. We provide the expertise needed for the comprehensive evaluation and management of people with lupus. We aim to design a personalized treatment plan best suited for each person with lupus. In addition, in order to provide for

comprehensive care of our patients with lupus National Jewish Health also provides physical, occupational, and recreational rehabilitation services in our rehabilitation department.

Other Resources:

Lupus Foundation of America, Inc.

Website: www.lupus.org

National Institutes of Health, NIAMS

Website: www.niams.nih.gov

Arthritis Foundation

Website: www.arthritis.org

For more information or to schedule an evaluation with one of our Rheumatologists, call LUNG LINE® at 1-800-222-LUNG.

Note: This information is provided to you as an educational service of LUNG LINE® (1-800-222-LUNG). It is not meant to be a substitute for consulting with your own physician.

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