

Lupus

Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), otherwise known as lupus, is a chronic condition that results from a malfunctioning immune system. The immune system is designed to identify foreign bodies (such as bacteria and viruses) and attack them to keep us healthy.

However, in the case of lupus, the immune system mistakenly attacks particular tissues including the skin, joints, kidneys and lining of the heart and lungs, causing ongoing inflammation and pain.

Lupus can range from mild to life threatening. This very much depends on the parts of the body that are being attacked by the immune system. While inflammation and pain of the skin and joints can impact on your quality of life, the damage that lupus may cause to your major organs, such as the kidneys or nervous system, is much more serious.

The most common forms of lupus are the milder forms, and most people with lupus enjoy a full life even though they may need to take medications.

Lupus is more common in women and certain ethnic groups

Women in their child-bearing years are most likely to develop lupus. Nine times more women have lupus than do men. Certain ethnic groups are also more likely to develop lupus, such as African-American women and Asians. However, lupus can affect men, children and older people.

Lupus can cause a range of symptoms

A host of different symptoms can occur, but one individual is unlikely to have all of them. The symptoms of lupus can vary, and may include:

- skin rashes (both on the face and body)
- joint and muscle pain
- hair loss
- fatigue
- mouth and nose ulcers
- chest pain (as a result of inflammation of the lining of the heart or lungs)
- anaemia (a deficiency in the number or quality of red blood cells)
- poor kidney function
- seizures or visual disturbances (resulting from inflammation of the nervous system).

The cause is unknown

Currently, the cause of lupus is unknown. However, it appears that genes may play a role as well as triggers such as an illness, injury, or a period of stress. This condition affects one in 700 Australians. There are more than 5,000 people with lupus in Victoria. More people have lupus than AIDS, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis and cystic fibrosis combined.

Early diagnosis is important

Lupus is a difficult condition to diagnose. There is no single medical test for lupus, and the symptoms can vary greatly from one person to another. The symptoms can often mimic those of other diseases, and it may take months or years to arrive at a diagnosis of lupus.

A diagnosis is often made through a combination of the history of your symptoms, blood tests that focus on particular antibodies, and results of tests for affected body systems such as the kidneys.

Usually a period of high lupus activity (a flare) is followed by a period of remission. It is most important to have a diagnosis as soon as possible after the appearance of symptoms, because internal organs can be affected if targeted by the disease.

Treatment

There is no way to cure or prevent lupus, but the disease and its symptoms can be well controlled with medication. These may include:

- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
- Oral cortisone
- Oral plaquenil
- Disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs).

Support is available

It is natural to feel overwhelmed by a diagnosis of lupus, as there is currently no cure and it can affect many parts of your life. You may experience a loss of independence, self-esteem, ability to work and continue social or recreational activities. You may feel scared, frustrated, sad or angry.

It is important to acknowledge these feelings and get help if they start affecting your daily life. Your doctor or other health professional will be able to provide you with information about support that is available.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- A specialist (often a dermatologist, rheumatologist, nephrologist or immunologist)
- Arthritis Victoria Tel. (03) 8531 8000 or 1800 011 041

Things to remember

- Lupus is an autoimmune disease that can be mild or life-threatening.
- The most common forms of lupus are the milder forms, and most people with lupus enjoy a full life even though they may need to take medications.
- The symptoms vary, depending on which tissues in the body are targeted. There is no cure, but lupus and its symptoms can be controlled with medication.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Arthritis Victoria incorporating Osteoporosis Victoria

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