

Lupus

Lupus (systemic lupus erythematosus or SLE) is an autoimmune condition that causes various tissues in the body to become inflamed (swollen and painful). Lupus can be mild or life-threatening and the symptoms depend on which tissues are affected. Lupus can occur in any susceptible person of either sex at any age, but is more common in women of childbearing age. The cause is unknown.

Lupus is one of a number of autoimmune illnesses. Rather than producing antibodies to fight and destroy disease-causing bacteria or viruses, the person's immune system mistakenly attacks their perfectly healthy body tissues.

Lupus can affect any part of the body

Any part of the body can become inflamed. For example:

- Joint inflammation will cause pain and swelling.
- Skin inflammation may cause a rash, body and mouth ulcers or hair loss.
- Inflammation of a major organ like the kidney may affect how the organ functions. Likewise, inflammation of the lining of the heart or lung may cause chest pain.

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 may include:

- Joint or muscle pain
- Fever (often low grade)
- Mouth ulcers
- Chest pain
- Extreme tiredness
- Skin rash
- Hair loss
- Sunlight sensitivity
- Kidney problems
- Clotting problems
- Seizures
- Unexplained headaches, migraines or mood swings.

The cause is unknown

Lupus isn't contagious. There is a genetic component, yet the cause is unknown. Most commonly, it appears in women of childbearing age. 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

If you have symptoms of lupus, you should see your doctor. Your doctor will diagnose the condition based on:

- Observing your symptoms
- A clinical examination
- Various tests – these can include tests to check the presence of certain antibodies in the blood and urine tests, as well as tests to check organs such as your heart and lungs.

There is no one single test that can tell whether you have lupus. It can be difficult to diagnose lupus and may take some time as the symptoms can be similar to other types of arthritis.

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:

- Non-steroidal 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 8046 or 1800 011 041

Things to remember

- Lupus is an autoimmune disease that can be mild or life-threatening.
- 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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