

## Lupus in men

Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) is an autoimmune disease. These are diseases in which people develop antibodies against their own cells, resulting in tissue damage. The tissues in the body become inflamed and trigger a wide range of symptoms. The disease can be mild or life threatening and its cause is still unknown. Lupus most commonly appears in women of childbearing age, for reasons unknown; around nine times more females than males have lupus. Because of this, most of the research and literature about lupus is geared towards women. This can leave men who have the disease with less information and support. Lupus organisations around the world are trying to redress this imbalance.

### Lupus and gender

Types of lupus include:

- **Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE)** – SLE can affect any tissue or organ and can produce a wide range of symptoms. No two people with SLE will experience the same manifestations of the disease. SLE is the type of lupus that is more common in women.
- **Discoid lupus erythematosus (DLE)** – DLE (or discoid) is confined to the skin. Symptoms include reddened and scaled patches of skin that may induce hair loss (alopecia) if they appear on the scalp. Most people with DLE are sun sensitive. DLE is the type of lupus that is more common in men. DLE may be a manifestation of SLE.
- **Drug-induced lupus** – certain medications can provoke SLE-like symptoms, which then disappear once the medications are stopped. Drugs that are known to cause lupus-like symptoms include certain hypertensive (high blood pressure) medications and drugs for heart abnormalities. Men are more likely to experience drug-induced lupus because they take more of these particular medications than women. Some researchers suspect that genetic susceptibility may play a significant role.

### Age factors for SLE

SLE most commonly targets women of childbearing age. For every prepubescent boy with SLE, there are around three girls with the disease. This ratio increases dramatically in adulthood; for every grown man with SLE, there are about 10 women. Once women reach menopause, the ratio dips slightly; for every older man with SLE, there are eight older women.

### The significance of sex hormones

Women are more prone to lupus than men and lupus ratios between the genders show a clear pattern from puberty to old age. These factors indicate to many researchers that sex hormones may play a role in the development of the disease. The principle hormones under investigation include the female hormone oestrogen, which is made by the ovaries and triggers ovulation every menstrual cycle, and the male hormones called androgens that are responsible for masculine physical characteristics.

Research findings include:

- Both oestrogen and androgens may be metabolised differently in people with lupus than in the general population.
- Women with lupus metabolise androgens much faster than women without the disease.
- Low levels of male hormones at pre-puberty and old age may contribute to the incidence of autoimmune diseases in males of these age groups.

### Progression of the disease

The symptoms of SLE are much the same for both women and men at the onset of disease. Research is divided on whether SLE progression differs between the sexes. Most researchers consider the course of disease as the same, but some preliminary studies suggest that men are more likely than women to experience damage to the kidneys, nervous system and vascular system.

### **Coping with having a 'woman's disease'**

A man who is newly diagnosed with lupus may be distressed by certain concepts. The very diagnosis of having what may be seen as a 'woman's disease' may be humiliating for some men. Since most people with lupus are women, men may feel they don't belong in female-oriented support groups. Lupus associations recognise this lack of support for men and are working to redress the imbalance.

### **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 (systemic lupus erythematosus or SLE) is an autoimmune disease.
- Men are more likely to develop discoid lupus or drug-induced lupus.
- Around nine times more females than males have lupus.
- Most of the research and literature about lupus is geared towards women, leaving men who have the disease with less information and support.

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

Arthritis Victoria incorporating Osteoporosis Victoria

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