Lupus and pregnancy
Summary

- Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), otherwise known as lupus, is a chronic condition that results from a malfunctioning immune system.
- Lupus tends to appear in women of childbearing age.
- The majority of women with lupus are able to have children.
- Talk with your doctor for information and advice before planning a pregnancy.

Lupus tends to appear in women of childbearing age. It can affect pregnancy, however most women are able to have children. All pregnancies will need careful medical monitoring because of the risk of complications. It’s generally best to have no lupus symptoms and to have taken no medication for at least six months prior to conception.

How lupus affects pregnancy

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

For these reasons, it’s important that you plan your pregnancy carefully.

Your condition should be under control and you should be in the best health possible. The healthier you are before you get pregnant, the greater the chance that you will have a healthy pregnancy and a healthy baby.

Talk with your doctor and specialist before you get pregnant. They may need to make important changes to your medication to ensure a safe pregnancy. Some medications are safe to take while you’re pregnant however others, like methotrexate, shouldn’t be taken. You may need to stop taking some medications months before trying to get pregnant as they can be harmful to your baby. Your doctors will help you plan this.

In some cases, there is a reduction in lupus symptoms during pregnancy. Your lupus is more likely to be stable throughout your pregnancy if your condition was stable before conceiving.

Complications of pregnancy

Most women with lupus are able to have a healthy baby, however sometimes complications can occur. That’s why it’s so important you plan your pregnancy and work closely with your healthcare team to ensure you’re as healthy as possible before, during and after your pregnancy.

It’s also important that you know the possible problems that may occur so that you can be treated immediately. Many of these issues can be prevented or treated effectively if they’re dealt with early. Here are some problems that can occur during pregnancy that you should be aware of:

- flares of your lupus symptoms may occur during pregnancy or immediately after you deliver, however this is less likely if your condition was stable before you became pregnant
- high blood pressure (hypertension)
- your baby may be born with low birth weight
- pre-eclampsia – symptoms include high blood pressure and excessive amounts of protein lost through your urine
- premature labour
- hospital admission may be needed at various stages throughout your pregnancy
- increased risk of miscarriage.

Medical care before and during pregnancy

It’s important that you have consistent and adequate medical care before and during your pregnancy. Discuss your plans to become pregnant with your doctor and specialist before you conceive. They can advise you of the best time to fall pregnant – it’s advisable to have had no lupus symptoms for at least six months prior to conception. They can also let you know about any particular risks you may face and whether your medication needs to be changed. Some medication taken for lupus can cross the placenta and pose a threat to your baby.

Once you have become pregnant, it’s important to contact your treating doctor in case your treatment needs to be changed or further tests are required. Proper antenatal care is vital in order to anticipate, prevent and solve any problems that may occur.

It’s also important to closely monitor the growth rate of the baby to make sure that all is well. It’s recommended that you consult closely with both a rheumatologist and a specialist obstetrician throughout your pregnancy.

Lupus flares and normal pregnancy symptoms
Sometimes, it can be difficult to distinguish between a lupus flare and normal pregnancy symptoms. For this reason you should work closely with your healthcare team and obstetrician.

Some of the symptoms of pregnancy that may mimic those of lupus include:

- build-up of fluid in the joints
- skin rashes or flushes
- hair loss following childbirth.

**Lupus pregnancies and increased rate of premature birth and miscarriage**

During pregnancy, the growing baby is nourished by the placenta. About one third of women with lupus have antiphospholipid antibodies (lupus anticoagulant or anti-cardiolipin antibody) that may cause blood clots and interfere with the proper functioning of the placenta.

This is most likely to happen in the second trimester. The placenta isn’t able to supply the baby with sufficient nourishment and the baby’s growth is slowed. This may require early delivery via caesarean section. If the baby is born after 30 weeks’ gestation, or is at least 1.3 kg in weight, its chances of survival are good.

Your doctor can screen for antiphospholipid antibodies, and if they are found, may prescribe a blood thinner to help prevent blood clots. This can help prevent miscarriage in many women.

Pre-eclampsia is a condition that involves increased blood pressure or protein in the blood (or both). It occurs in one in five women with lupus. If left untreated it can endanger the life of both the woman and her baby. Pre-eclampsia can be treated. However depending on the severity, it may also require early delivery.

**Neonatal lupus**

Around one third of women with lupus have anti-Ro or anti-SSA antibodies. These antibodies may cause lupus-like symptoms in the baby once it’s born. This is known as neonatal lupus. Symptoms may include skin rash, unusual blood count and, rarely, heartbeat irregularities. This is not SLE.

In babies who don’t experience heartbeat irregularities, all symptoms of neonatal lupus usually resolve by three to six months of age. Heartbeat irregularities can be successfully treated.

**Lupus and pregnancy delay advice**

Some women with lupus should delay pregnancy and discuss their plan with their treating doctor when they are planning to have a baby.

They include:

- women whose lupus is active
- women taking medication such as methotrexate, mycophenolate, or cyclophosphamide
- women with kidney disease
- women with previous thrombosis or miscarriage.

If you have any questions about your condition, medications and pregnancy, talk with your doctor.

**Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Obstetrician
- A specialist (often a dermatologist, rheumatologist, nephrologist or immunologist)
- Musculoskeletal Australia, National Help Line Tel. (03) 8531 8000 or 1800 263 265

**References**

- Lupus, Musculoskeletal Australia.
- Planning a pregnancy, Lupus Foundation of America.
- Antiphospholipid antibody syndrome and pregnancy, Lupus Foundation of America.
- Pregnancy in women with systemic lupus erythematosus, UpToDate.

**Send us your feedback**

- Rate this website
- Your comments
- Questions
- Your details

1/4 How would you rate this website?
Send us your feedback

- Rate this website
- Your comments
- Questions
- Your details

Please note that we cannot answer personal medical queries. If you are looking for health or medical advice we recommend that you:

- talk to your doctor or pharmacist
- dial triple zero (000) in an emergency
- ring NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24.

2/4 Your Comments

Tell us who you are

Enter your comments below (optional)

Next Submit Now Cancel

Send us your feedback

- Rate this website
- Your comments
- Questions
- Your details

3/4 Questions

What are you here to do?

Did you find what you were looking for?

- Yes
- No

Next Submit Now Cancel

Send us your feedback

- Rate this website
- Your comments
- Questions
- Your details

4/4 Your details

Postcode

Email Address

Submit Now Cancel

Send us your feedback

Thank you. Your feedback has been successfully sent.

More information

Immune system

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Immune system explained
- Lymphatic system
- Spleen
- Lupus
- Autoimmune disorders
Immune system explained

- Immune system explained
  
  The immune system remembers every germ it has ever overcome...

- Vaccines
  
  Vaccines trick the body into building immunity against infectious diseases without causing the actual disease...

Lymphatic system

- Fluid retention (oedema)
  
  Fluid retention (oedema) occurs when fluid isn’t removed from the body tissues, including the skin. Causes include the body’s reaction to hot weather, a high salt intake, and the hormones associated...

- Lymphatic system
  
  The lymphatic manages fluid levels in the body, filters out bacteria and houses types of white blood cells...

- Lymphoedema
  
  Women who have undergone treatment of breast cancer are particularly susceptible to lymphoedema of the arm...

- Lymphoma
  
  Lymphoma is a general term for a cancer that begins in the lymphatic system...

Spleen

- Spleen
  
  Surgically removing a diseased or damaged spleen is possible without causing any serious harm to the person...

- Splenomegaly
  
  Any conditions that cause a rapid breakdown of blood cells can place great strain on the spleen and make it enlarge...

Lupus

- Lupus
  
  Lupus can be mild or life-threatening, depending on which tissues are affected...

- Lupus and infections
  
  The most common infections for people with lupus include those of the respiratory tract, skin and urinary system...

- Lupus and medication
  
  Lupus most commonly appears in women of childbearing age...

- Lupus and pregnancy
  
  Lupus can be controlled with medications, so the majority of affected women are able to have children...

Autoimmune disorders

- Addison's disease
  
  Most cases of Addison's disease are caused by an autoimmune response that attacks and damages the adrenal glands over time...

- Autoimmune disorders
  
  There is generally no cure for an autoimmune disorder, but the symptoms can be managed...

- Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS)
  
  Myalgic encephalomyelitis, commonly known as chronic fatigue syndrome, can affect people of any age, including children...

- Diabetes type 1
  
  Type 1 diabetes can affect anyone of any age, but is more common in people under 30 years...

- Henoch-Schonlein purpura
  
  Henoch-Schonlein purpura causes a purple spotted skin rash which lasts around one to four weeks, and is often marked by relapses...

- HIV
In Australia, HIV is most commonly spread when having sex without a condom and when sharing needles and other injecting equipment...

- Hughes syndrome
  Hughes syndrome is thickening of the blood caused by abnormal immune system cells...

- Idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura (ITP)
  Idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura (ITP) is a rare autoimmune disorder in which a person's immune system destroys the platelets that help their blood to clot...

- Lipoedema
  Lipoedema is a painful, chronic, symmetrical swelling in the legs, thighs, buttocks and sometimes arms due to the accumulation of fat in the subcutaneous tissues. The onset often occurs during puberty...

- Myasthenia gravis
  Myasthenia gravis is an autoimmune disease that causes muscle weakness...

- Polymyositis
  Polymyositis is hard to diagnose and may be mistaken for muscular dystrophy...

- Raynaud's phenomenon
  Raynaud's phenomenon can be a sign of a more serious underlying condition, so see your doctor if you experience it...

- Reactive arthritis
  Reactive arthritis is a form of arthritis that occurs as a result of some bacterial infections...

- Retroperitoneal fibrosis
  Retroperitoneal fibrosis is the abnormal growth of tissue on and around abdominal structures, including blood vessels and ureters...

- Rheumatoid arthritis
  Early treatment of rheumatoid arthritis is important in helping you manage the condition more effectively...

- Scleroderma
  The most common symptom of scleroderma is a thickening and hardening of the skin, particularly of the hands and face...

- Sjogren's syndrome
  Sjogren’s syndrome can be managed with medications and products such as artificial tears and saliva...

- Thyroid - Hashimoto's disease
  Hashimoto's disease progresses very slowly over many years, so the symptoms may go unnoticed...

- Thyroid - hyperthyroidism
  Hyperthyroidism can be diagnosed with a simple blood test that measures thyroid hormone levels...

Related Information

- Lupus and medication
  Lupus most commonly appears in women of childbearing age...

- Lupus and infections
  The most common infections for people with lupus include those of the respiratory tract, skin and urinary system...

- Pregnancy and smoking
  Smoking while pregnant exposes a woman and her unborn child to an increased risk of health problems...

- Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS)
  Myalgic encephalomyelitis, commonly known as chronic fatigue syndrome, can affect people of any age, including children...

- Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)
  The World Health Organization recommends that pregnant women should avoid alcohol...

Home

Related information on other websites

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
My Health Life helps you manage your health

With tools, information and recommendations tailored to you, it’s your personal and secure health dashboard.

Learn more

Medical Dictionary

Enter a search term

Search

Search for your topic using the Merriam Webster medical dictionary
Find a doctor

Need to find a doctor in your local area? Take a look at the general practitioners entry in our health service profiles.

see general practitioner

Recent Activity

9 people have watched a video today

- **Health topics**
  - Conditions and treatments
  - Healthy living
  - Services and support

- **Explore**
  - Recipes
  - Healthy pantry
  - Videos
  - Consumer medicine information
  - Multilingual health information - Health Translations Directory

- **About**
  - About us
  - Accessibility
  - Content partners
  - Privacy
  - Terms of use
  - Contact us

- **Connect with us**
  - Facebook
  - Twitter
  - YouTube

Page last reviewed: 30 Jun 2015
