



Lupus Fact Sheet

Lupus is a Chronic Autoimmune Disease

Lupus is a disease of the immune system. The immune system normally protects the body by producing antibodies, or proteins, that attach to and destroy foreign invaders, such as bacteria or viruses. In people with lupus, the immune system, for yet undiscovered reasons, produces antibodies that target the body's own healthy cells, which can lead to tissue damage, organ failure, disability or mortality.

While the exact cause of lupus is not fully understood, a combination of defective genes and environmental factors are believed to cause lupus disease activity. The environmental triggers include infections, antibiotics (especially those in the sulfa and penicillin groups), ultraviolet light (sun or fluorescent light), extreme stress, certain medicines, and hormones.

There are Different Types of Lupus

There are several forms of lupus. **Discoid or cutaneous lupus** is limited to the skin. **Systemic lupus** can involve any system of the body, including the joints and other connective tissue, as well as the heart, lungs, kidneys, brain and other vital organs. **Drug-induced lupus** is caused by certain medicines. Its symptoms are similar to systemic lupus but usually go away when a person stops taking the medicine. **Neonatal lupus** is an additional form of lupus that can affect the fetus or newborn, and involves the skin, blood, and vital organs, such as the heart and liver.

Lupus Affects Mostly Young Women

Conservatively, researchers estimate that more than 5 million people worldwide have a form of lupus and more than 100,000 new cases develop every year. Nine of ten people with lupus are women. The disease usually develops between the ages of 15 and 44. However, lupus can strike men, children and women of all ages. Lupus is more common among people of certain races and ethnic backgrounds, although the reasons for this ethnic selection are not clear.

Lupus Can Be Difficult to Diagnose

It can take several years to tell if a person has lupus because symptoms are similar to many common illnesses. Symptoms of lupus often change over time, can come and go without explanation, and can vary in intensity, making diagnosis difficult. There also is no single test for lupus. A doctor will determine that a person has lupus after giving the patient a thorough medical examination and reviewing the patient's complete medical history, family medical history, and laboratory test results.

Lupus Fact Sheet (Continue)

Common Symptoms of Lupus

Lupus affects each person differently. The most common symptoms of lupus are painful and swollen joints, fevers, extreme fatigue, skin rashes, anemia (a low number of red blood cells), and kidney involvement. These symptoms occur in more than half of all persons with lupus, but not everyone with lupus will develop all of these symptoms or experience them all at the same time. Other symptoms include pain in the chest on deep breathing (pleurisy), a butterfly-shaped rash across the cheeks and nose, sensitivity to the sun or ultraviolet light (photosensitivity), hair loss, abnormal blood clotting, Raynaud's phenomenon (fingers or toes turning white, red and/or blue in the cold), seizures, and ulcers in the mouth or nose.

Treatments Vary from Person to Person

Individuals with lupus can suffer debilitating pain, tissue damage and organ failure. Depending on which organs are affected and the severity of disease, individuals with lupus may have to take multiple medicines, be treated by physicians from several medical specialties, undergo numerous medical evaluations and procedures, and be hospitalized several times per year.

Doctors will prescribe certain medicines to treat lupus, depending on the specific needs of each person. Medicines used to treat lupus include non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, aspirin, acetaminophen, corticosteroids, antimalarials, immunomodulating drugs, and anticoagulants. Many medicines used to treat lupus are very toxic and can cause other health problems from long-term use. There has not been a new medicine approved in more than 30 years specifically for lupus. New medicines are being tested but are not available at this time. More research is needed to develop safer and more effective medicines to treat lupus.

Impact of Lupus

In addition to the physical impact that affects the quality of life of a person with lupus, families often must cope with the economic and emotional devastation caused when a loved one develops a serious illness. Medical expenses can wreak havoc on a family's financial stability, and a family's lifestyle may undergo significant changes in daily schedules of activities, employment options, parenting, relationships, etc. Society at large also suffers from this disease that causes lost work days, increased burden at hospitals, and disruption of family routines.

Search for a Cure Continues

At the present time, there is no cure for lupus. Doctors can only treat the symptoms and try to control the disease. For some people, lupus is a very mild disease affecting only a few organs or systems in the body. For others, lupus may cause serious and even life-threatening health problems. In extreme cases people die from lupus. It is important that people who have lupus be diagnosed quickly and start treatment immediately to keep the disease under control and reduce the damage it can cause to tissue and organs. For more information, visit the World Lupus Day website at www.worldlupusday.org.