

What is Lupus? Basic Facts

Lupus is an autoimmune disease. Your body's immune system is like an army with hundreds of soldiers. The immune system's job is to fight foreign substances in the body, like germs and viruses. But in autoimmune diseases, the immune system is out of control. It attacks healthy tissues, not viruses or bacteria. You can't catch lupus from another person. It is not cancer, and it is not related to AIDS.

Lupus is a disease that can affect many parts of the body. Everyone reacts differently. One person with lupus may have swollen knees and fever. Another person may be tired all the time or have kidney trouble. Someone else may have rashes. Lupus can involve the joints, the skin, the kidneys, the lungs, the heart and/or the brain. If you have lupus, it may affect two or three parts of your body. Usually, one person doesn't have all the possible symptoms.

There are four main types of lupus:

- **Systemic lupus erythematosus** (eh-RITH-eh-muh-TOE-sus) is the most common form. It's sometimes called SLE, or just lupus. The word "systemic" means that the disease can involve many parts of the body such as the heart, lungs, kidneys, and brain. SLE symptoms can be mild or serious.
- **Discoid lupus erythematosus** mainly affects the skin. A red rash may appear, or the skin on the face, scalps, or elsewhere may change color.
- **Drug-induced lupus** is triggered by a few medicines. It's like SLE, but symptoms are usually milder. Most of the time, the disease goes away when the medicine is stopped. More men develop drug-induced lupus because the drugs that cause it, hydralazine and procainamide, are used to treat heart conditions that are more common in men.
- **Neonatal lupus erythematosus (NLE)** is a rare disorder caused by the transplacental passage of maternal auto antibodies. Only 1% of infants with positive maternal auto antibodies develop neonatal lupus erythematosus. The most common clinical manifestations are cardiac dermatologic, and hepatic. Some infants may also have hematologic abnormalities.

What Are the Signs and Symptoms of Lupus?

Lupus may be hard to diagnose. It's often mistaken for other diseases. For this reason, lupus has been called the "great imitator." The signs of lupus differ from person to person. Some people have just a few signs; others have more. Common signs of lupus are:

- Red rash or color change on the face, often in the shape of a butterfly across the nose and cheeks
- Painful or swollen joints
- Unexplained fever
- Chest pain with deep breathing
- Swollen glands
- Extreme fatigue (feeling tired all the time)
- Unusual hair loss (mainly on the scalp)
- Pale or purple fingers or toes from cold or stress
- Sensitivity to the sun

- Low blood count

Depression, trouble thinking, and/or memory problems. Other signs are mouth sores, unexplained seizures (convulsions), “seeing things” (hallucinations), repeated miscarriages, and unexplained kidney problems.

What Causes Lupus?

We don't know what causes lupus. There is no cure, but in most cases lupus can be managed. Lupus sometimes seems to run in families, which suggests the disease may be hereditary. Having the genes isn't the whole story, though. The environment, sunlight, stress, and certain medicines may trigger symptoms in some people. Other people who have similar genetic backgrounds may not get signs or symptoms of the disease. Researchers are trying to find out why.

Who Gets Lupus?

Anyone can get lupus. But 9 out of 10 people who have it are women. African American women are three times more likely to get lupus than white women. It's also more common in Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and American Indian women.

Both African Americans and Hispanics/Latinos tend to develop lupus at a younger age and have more symptoms at diagnosis (including kidney problems).

They also tend to have more severe disease than whites. For example, African American patients have more seizures and strokes, while Hispanic/Latino patients have more heart problems. We don't understand why some people seem to have more problems with lupus than others.

Lupus is most common in women between the ages of 15 and 44. These are roughly the years when most women are able to have babies. Scientists think a woman's hormones may have something to do with getting lupus. But it's important to remember that men and older people can get it, too.

It's less common for children under age 15 to have lupus. One exception is babies born to women with lupus. These children may have heart, liver, or skin problems caused by lupus. With good care, most women with lupus can have a normal pregnancy and a healthy baby.

Diagnosis: How Do You Find Out If You Have Lupus?

- Medical history – Telling a doctor about your symptoms and other problems you have had can help him or her understand your situation. Your history can provide clues to your disease.
- Complete physical exam – The doctor will look for rashes and other signs that something is wrong.
- Laboratory testing of blood and urine samples – Blood and urine samples often show if your immune system is overactive.
- Skin or kidney biopsy – In a biopsy, tissue that is removed by a minor surgical procedure is examined under a microscope. Skin or kidney tissue examined in this way can show signs of an autoimmune disease.