

Lupus and Women

Lupus is a chronic autoimmune disease that can cause damage, including pain and inflammation in many parts of the body, including the joints, skin, kidneys, heart, lungs, blood vessels, nervous system, and brain. About 9 out of 10 adults with lupus are women ages 15 to 44. African-American women are three times more likely to develop lupus, and it is more common in Hispanic, Asian, and Native American and Alaska Native women. There is no cure for lupus, but treatments can help you feel better and improve your symptoms.

Q: How does lupus affect women?

A: Some women with lupus have only mild symptoms. But for others, lupus can cause severe problems. Women of color are more likely to have severe symptoms that happen earlier in life. Lupus also raises women's risk for other health problems, such as heart disease, osteoporosis, and kidney disease. Women with lupus who plan to get pregnant need to be especially careful to manage their symptoms.

Q: What are the symptoms of lupus?

A: Different people with lupus have different symptoms that can be mild or more serious at times. Lupus symptoms usually come and go, getting worse at times and then getting better. Common symptoms include:

- Muscle and joint pain
- Fever
- Rashes, such as a butterfly-shaped rash that may appear across the nose and cheeks
- Chest pain when taking a deep breath
- Hair loss

- Sun or light sensitivity
- Kidney problems
- Mouth sores (usually painless)
- Feeling very tired
- Anemia (too few red blood cells)
- Memory problems
- Blood clotting
- Eye disease (dry eyes, eye inflammation, or eyelid rashes)

Q: What can I do to control my symptoms?

A: There is no cure for lupus, but treatments can help you feel better. Learning what can trigger lupus symptoms can help you manage your symptoms. Treatment will depend on your symptoms and might include:

- Taking medicines to reduce swelling and pain, calm your immune system, and reduce damage to the joints or organs
- Reducing stress
- Limiting the amount of time you spend in the sun
- Choosing healthy foods and getting enough sleep and physical activity

Q: How can my doctor tell if I have lupus?

A: Lupus can be hard to diagnose because it has many symptoms that are often mistaken for symptoms of other diseases. Also, no single test can tell if a person has lupus. But your doctor can find out if you have lupus by asking you about your medical and family history and doing a physical exam and blood

tests. Your doctor may also do a biopsy to remove a sample of tissue from your skin or kidney to view under a microscope.

Q: I have lupus. Is it safe for me to become pregnant?

A: Yes. Women with lupus can safely become pregnant. But you will need to work closely with your doctor, because lupus increases the risk for problems that can happen during pregnancy.

- Your disease should be under control or in remission for six months before you get pregnant. Getting pregnant when lupus is active could result in miscarriage or stillbirth.

- Pregnant lupus patients with a history of kidney disease have a higher risk of preeclampsia, a condition that can lead to premature birth.
- Pregnant women with lupus are more likely to have high blood pressure, diabetes, and kidney problems, especially if they're taking medicines called corticosteroids.
- Although many women with lupus have normal pregnancies, all women with lupus who get pregnant are considered to have a "high-risk" pregnancy. This means that problems during pregnancy may be more likely. It doesn't mean there will be problems.

For more information...

For more information about lupus, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

Phone: 866-284-4107 • www.niaid.nih.gov

National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases

877-226-4267 • www.niams.nih.gov

Lupus Research Alliance

800-867-1743 • www.lupusresearch.org

American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association

586-776-3900

800-598-4668 (literature requests) • www.aarda.org

Lupus Foundation of America

800-558-0121 • www.lupus.org

The Office on Women's Health is grateful for the additional reviews by:

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