**WHAT IS SYSTEMIC LUPUS ERYTHEMATOSUS?**

Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE) is an autoimmune disease in which the immune system produces antibodies to cells within the body, rather than attacking foreign cells or antigens, as it should. This abnormal immune response produces widespread inflammation and immune complexes, which cause tissue damage in the musculoskeletal, dermatologic (skin), hematologic (blood related), cardiac, pulmonary, renal (kidney), and central nervous systems.

**WHO IS AT RISK FOR DEVELOPING SLE?**

The cause is unknown, but the following factors have been associated with SLE:

- Female gender, of African-American or Asian race
- Genetics (high concordance in identical twins)
- Hormonal factors (higher frequency in females – estrogen may be involved, decreased risk with breastfeeding, increased risk of other hormone related diseases)
- Immunologic factors (loss of self-tolerance)
- Environmental factors (viruses/other microbes, UV light, silica dust, cigarettes, medications, and medication allergies)

**WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF SLE?**

Fatigue, joint pain and skin conditions are among the most common, but a variety of symptoms may occur depending on the affected organ system. Symptoms may range from very mild to severe:

- Joint complaints range from mild pain to severe inflammatory arthritis or muscle atrophy with generalized weakness.
- Skin complaints:
  - "Butterfly rash" (malar rash) - a reddened area of the upper cheeks and nasal bridge that may intensify after sun exposure.
  - Hair loss
  - Sun sensitivity
- Raynaud's phenomenon (painful finger/toe-tips with cold exposure)
- Weight loss or gain, fever
- Chest pain that increases with respiration, breathlessness
- Confusion, memory impairment, fatigue, depression
- Pregnancy loss/complications
- Sores in the mouth or nose
- Blood clots
- Poor kidney function

**HOW IS SLE DIAGNOSED?**

The diagnosis is made based on a thorough history, a physical examination, and diagnostic tests (blood and other tests). It is important to recognize that many of the symptoms of SLE are also common to other medical conditions. The presence of these symptoms, therefore, doesn't mean you have SLE. For example, fatigue, fever, or chest pain may be explained by other possible diagnoses.

**HOW IS SLE MANAGED?**

It is important to be aware that certain factors can trigger an SLE flare. These include sun exposure, infections, certain antibiotics (sulfonamides and penicillin), stress, surgery, and pregnancy.

Persons with photosensitivity should avoid sun exposure and discontinue any offending medications. Smoking is especially harmful to persons with SLE. In addition, your doctor will advise you on the important issues of diet and nutrition, exercise, immunizations, and matters related to pregnancy.

Treatment is based on the severity of symptoms and the organ systems that are affected. Medication therapy may include anti-inflammatory agents (NSAIDs), anti-malarials, corticosteroids, and immunosuppressive agents.
Regardless of symptom severity, emotional support is important as individuals and their families adjust to the diagnosis and its implications. Most persons with the diagnosis of SLE are able to lead active, satisfying lives with the support of friends and family members, and the assistance of medication when needed.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

- American College of Rheumatology Web site, search for Systemic Lupus Erythematosus
- Arthritis Foundation Web site, search for Systemic Lupus Erythematosus
- Lupus Foundation of America Web site, search for Systemic Lupus Erythematosus
- Lupus Research Institute Web site, search for Systemic Lupus Erythematosus
- National Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases Information Clearinghouse Web site, search for Systemic Lupus Erythematosus

References


If you are a registered University of Illinois student and you have questions or concerns, or need to make an appointment, please call: Dial-A-Nurse at 333-2700

If you are concerned about any difference in your treatment plan and the information in this handout, you are advised to contact your health care provider.

Visit the McKinley Health Center Web site at: http://www.mckinley.illinois.edu