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Do You Have Lupus?

The Health Education Network



The Health Education Network is a Program of the Minority Organ Donation Education Program, Inc.

If you have lupus, you probably have many questions. Lupus isn't a simple disease with an easy answer. You can't take a pill and make it go away. The people you live with and work with may have trouble understanding that you're sick. Lupus doesn't have a clear set of signs that people can see. You may know that something's wrong, even though it may take a while to be diagnosed.

Lupus has many shades. It can affect people of different races, ethnicities, and ages, both men and women. It can look like different diseases. It's different for every person who has it. The good news is that you can get help and fight lupus. Learning about it is the first step. Ask questions. Talk to your doctor, family, and friends. People who look for answers are more likely to find them. This booklet can help you get started.

What Is Lupus?

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 germs. **You can't catch lupus from another person.** It isn't cancer, and it isn't 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.

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 Will the Doctor Do?

Go see a doctor. He or she will talk to you and take a history of your health problems. Many people have lupus for a long time before they find out they have it. It's important that you tell the doctor or nurse about your symptoms. This information, along with a physical examination and the results of laboratory tests, helps the

doctor decide whether you have lupus or something else.

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.