**Systemic Lupus Erythematous**

*(Lupus; SLE; Lupus, Systemic)*

---

**Definition**

Systemic lupus erythematous (SLE) is an autoimmune disorder that causes inflammation of joints, tendons, skin, blood vessels and other connective tissue, and organs. SLE causes the immune system to produce antibodies that attack the body's healthy cells and tissue. There are several forms of lupus, but SLE is the most common and most well-known.

**Causes**

The cause of SLE is unknown. It is likely due to a combination of genetic and environmental factors, such as viral infections or chemicals.

Flares of lupus can be triggered by:

- Ultraviolet rays from the sun or high intensity fluorescent light bulbs
- Certain drugs
- Infection or injury
- Physical or emotional stress

**Risk Factors**

SLE is more common in women aged 20-45 years old. It is also more common in people of African American, Native American, and Hispanic descent.

Other factors that increase your chance of SLE include:

- Family history
- Celiac disease
- Oral contraceptives

**Symptoms**

Symptoms can be mild or very severe. For some people, only part of the body, such as skin, is affected. For others, many parts are affected. Though symptoms can be chronic, there are usually periods of remission between flare-ups.

Common symptoms may include:
• Headaches
• Extreme fatigue
• Swollen and/or painful joints
• Fever without signs of infection
• Weight loss
• Skin rashes over areas exposed to sunlight, especially butterfly shaped rash over the nose and cheeks
• Mouth sores

Common SLE Rash Sites

Facial butterfly rash is a hallmark symptom of SLE.
Copyright © Nucleus Medical Media, Inc.

Other symptoms depend on the area of the body that is affected:

• Skin—may become sensitive to light, have hives, or red or purple rashes, or have hair loss
• Muscles—may become stiff and weak
• Gastrointestinal—may cause nausea, vomiting, or abdominal pain
• Heart and lungs—may cause trouble breathing or chest pain
• Brain and nerves—may lead to psychiatric disorders, such as depression, seizures, and nerve pain and numbness
• Glands—may cause swollen nodes or spleen
• Blood—may result in anemia, bleeding, or blood clots

SLE may cause complications during pregnancy. There may be a flare-up of symptoms, kidney problems, or pre-eclampsia. There is also an increased risk of premature birth, stillbirth, miscarriage, or growth problems with the baby during pregnancy.

Diagnosis

Your doctor will ask about your symptoms and medical history. A physical exam will be done. Diagnosis is based on specific diagnostic criteria related to your signs and symptoms. Your doctor will also rule out other health conditions that have symptoms similar to SLE. It may take some time to gather all the necessary information for a diagnosis.
Some tests include:

- Blood tests—specific tests may be positive with lupus
- Urine tests—to look for kidney damage
- Skin biopsy
- Kidney biopsy—to diagnose type of kidney disease, if you have kidney damage
- MRI scan—to look for abnormalities of internal structures

**Treatment**

SLE is not curable, but it can be managed with medications and lifestyle changes. You may also need treatment for issues caused by SLE.

Talk with your doctor about the best treatment plan for you. Treatment options depend on the severity and location of your symptoms.

**Medication**

There are many different kinds of medications that are used to treat SLE. Examples include:

- Antimalarial drugs—if no major organs are involved
- Corticosteroids
- Drugs to suppress the immune system
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)—only if you have no stomach symptoms
- B-cell therapy
- Anticoagulants—in those at risk for blood clots

Your doctor may recommend that you take a combination of medications.

**Preventing Flare-ups**

Some lifestyle changes can help you prevent flare-ups of SLE. Lower doses of antimalarial drugs, corticosteroids, and drugs to suppress the immune system may also be used to prevent flares. Work with your doctor to create a plan for your symptoms.

- Learn the signs of a flare-up and contact your doctor as soon as possible
- Get immediate treatment for any cuts or infections
- Manage symptoms for other chronic conditions caused by SLE
- Avoid sun exposure
- If you smoke, learn how to quit
- Eat a healthy diet
- Limit emotional stress
- Get enough rest
- Exercise regularly, with your doctor's permission

**Chronic Care**

Chronic conditions like SLE are best managed with strong communication between you and your healthcare team. Make sure to go to all appointments as recommended. Let your doctor know about any changes in your health or care program.
Depression in people with chronic health conditions like SLE is common, emotional support is important. Surround yourself with supportive family and friends. If you are still having problems, consider counseling or joining a support group.

**Prevention**

There are no current guidelines to prevent SLE since the cause is not known.

Last Reviewed: May 2016 Michael Woods, MD
Updated: 5/16/2016