

What is lupus?

Lupus is an autoimmune disease, which is an illness in which the immune system attacks its own tissue, mistakenly identifying it as dangerous, rather than fighting an infection, such as the common cold. For example. This damages the body and causes symptoms such as fatigue and pain.

Why is lupus difficult to diagnose among military personnel and veterans ?

Lupus is difficult to diagnose in the best of circumstances. Symptoms often persist for years before a correct diagnosis. But it is particularly difficult to diagnose in military personnel, because:

- Initial lupus symptoms often include fatigue, weight loss and joint pain, all of which could be chalked up to the activities & stress of military service.
- Most of the blood and urine tests that help diagnose lupus are not part of the routine testing done for military physicals.
- A diagnosis of lupus requires the healthcare provider to be thinking about lupus to do the testing

The earlier the diagnosis, the better the prognosis — increasing lupus awareness among healthcare providers for military personnel and veterans is critical.

Does military service cause lupus?

While the cause of lupus is not fully understood, certain risk factors increase the likelihood of getting the disease:

- Some people may have a genetic risk received from a parent, though those “risky” genes may not be activated.
- Triggers such as sickness or other stressors may lead to lupus.
- Direct UV (sunlight) exposure can worsen many of the rashes and other symptoms of lupus

Because of their exposure to high stress and environmental contaminants — military personnel are at potentially high risk of lupus.

Rashes are one symptom of lupus.



Malar Rash
[“Butterfly Rash”]
Red raised rash over mid-face, typically seen after sun exposure.



Discoid Lupus
Raised, circular patches prone to scarring.



Photosensitivity
Marked redness that can occur even with trivial sun exposure

Joint inflammation is another symptom.

Joint pain and swelling is very common among patients with lupus.

This inflammation is similar to osteoarthritis. How can you tell the difference?

- Lupus arthritis commonly affects the fingers, wrists, elbows and feet, whereas osteoarthritis is more common in the spine, hips, and knees.
- Other than pain, individuals with lupus may also experience joint warmth, swelling, and stiffness, especially in the mornings, whereas osteoarthritis more often causes pain after activity.

Lupus can affect your kidney.

Lupus can affect almost any part of your body, including the kidney.

- When your immune system attacks your kidney, it can cause permanent kidney damage – in some cases leading to dialysis or requiring a kidney transplant.
- Kidney disease can be life-threatening, but it can be controlled with medications if detected early enough.
- Your healthcare provider can check how well your kidney is working during office visits with blood and urine tests.

Kidney inflammation can be the first symptom of lupus a person contracts.

- High protein levels in your urine may be the first sign of lupus kidney involvement.
- If your doctor needs to further clarify the type of kidney damage you have, they may request a kidney biopsy, a procedure where a small piece of tissue is taken by needle from the kidney and examined under a microscope.

Lupus increases the risk for heart disease, including heart attacks and heart failure.

- Additionally, women with lupus have heart disease earlier than women without lupus.
- This is thought to happen due to increased inflammation to the heart from the immune system attacking its own tissue.

Here are some additional symptoms of lupus.



Hair loss

Hair loss can present as hair loss all over the head or as plaques on the scalp. It can be caused by lupus and by medications used to treat lupus.

Weight changes

Both weight gain and weight loss are features of lupus. This can be because of appetite change, medication use (like steroids), and kidney damage,

Reynaud Phenomenon



Reynaud Phenomenon is a symptom where blood vessels in your fingers squeeze and become narrow, triggered by the cold. This causes the tips of your fingers to turn white and blue, and then red temporarily. Note: Reynaud Phenomenon can be seen in people without lupus as well.

Eye dryness

This may feel as if you have something in your eye. You may also have trouble producing tears.

Depression is common in patients with lupus.

Some degree of sadness or frustration occasionally is normal . However, when these negative emotions become severe, debilitating, or long-lasting, it may be necessary to seek help from your doctor.

Depression is not only a mood disorder. People with depression often report:

- Sleep disturbances (too much or too little)
- Appetite changes
- Fatigue
- Crying spells
- Difficulty concentrations
- Loss of interest in activities one used to like

Approximately 30% of patients with lupus have significant depression, but this is likely even higher among veterans with lupus.

Depression CAN be treated. There are several treatment options.

You can always talk to your doctor about:

- Medications
- Referrals to receive therapy or counseling with a psychiatrist
- Resources to local lupus support groups

**National Suicide
Prevention Number:
1-800-273-8255**

How can you help lupus WITHOUT MEDICATION?

Adhere to a healthy diet

There is no standard “lupus diet,” but it is recommended that patients with lupus eat a balanced diet with fruits, vegetables, and fish, while minimizing fat.

If you are taking daily, long term steroids, ask your doctor if you need calcium or vitamin D supplementation to prevent osteoporosis.



Immunizations



Get your yearly flu vaccination and ask your rheumatologist if you need a vaccine to protect you from pneumonia (an infection of the lungs).

Sun Protection

Patients with with lupus are sensitive to sun exposure. Even trivial sun exposure can lead to rashes or skin damage.

- Limit or avoid time in areas like the beach, especially between 10 AM- 3PM.
- Wear at least SPF 50 thirty minutes before leaving the house, remembering to re-apply every 30 minutes.
- With sunscreen, wear wide-brimmed hats and clothing that covers the skin when going outside



Smoking Cessation



Smoking — even 2nd hand smoke exposure — has been associated with lupus.

Quitting smoking can improve symptoms like fatigue and Raynaud Phenomenon, while also drastically decreasing the risk of death from conditions like heart and lung disease. Talk to

your doctor about nicotine replacement therapies or possible medications that can assist you in quitting smoking.

**Toll-Free Number
for State Quitting
Line:**

**1-800-QUIT-NOW
(1-800-784-8669)**

Here are some treatments that may help lupus symptoms.

For rash

- Use appropriate sun protection.
- Hydroxychloroquine or chloroquine (anti-malarials) are medications that improve skin rashes.
- Topical medications, including steroid creams and ointments, may be helpful.

For joint pain

- NSAIDs (like ibuprofen, naproxen) and acetaminophen can be used.
- Hydroxychloroquine has also been shown to be helpful.
- A course of steroids may be used to improve a flare of joint inflammation when it is limiting daily activities.

For hair loss

- Hydroxychloroquine or chloroquine can help scalp lesions.
- Don't use Rogaine unless instructed to by a doctor, as lupus induced hair loss does not typically respond to Rogaine.
- DHEA has been used for hair loss in the past, but causes several side effects including acne.
- Ask your rheumatologist for additional treatments, if first-line measures are not helpful.

"The most important way to control hair loss is to control disease activity."

Dr. Victoria P. Werth

How can you lower your risk of heart disease?

- Work with your primary doctor to control other medical conditions that affect the heart, like high blood pressure (hypertension), diabetes, and high cholesterol.
- Ask your doctor if you should be taking an aspirin for heart disease.
- Hydroxychloroquine, a common medication used to manage lupus, has been shown to protect against heart disease by lowering cholesterol.
- Exercising and smoking cessation as discussed before are excellent lifestyle changes that improve heart health.

Commonly Used Medications for Lupus

Type	Examples	Uses	Side Effects (incomplete list)
NSAIDs	Ibuprofen, Naproxen, Meloxicam	Joint pains, headaches, prevents blood clots	Stomach pain, ulcers, or bleeding
Antimalarials	Hydroxychloroquine, Chloroquine	Fatigue, joint pains, myalgias, rashes, possibly reduces lupus flares	Nausea, vomiting, eye damage, weight loss, diarrhea, hair loss
Steroids	Prednisone, Methylprednisolone	Severe inflammation, lupus activity; or in short courses for even mild to moderate flares	Weight gain, high blood sugar, blood pressure, increased risk of infection, cataracts Long-term use: osteoporosis
Immunosuppressives	Cyclophosphamide Mycophenolate Methotrexate Azathioprine	Severe inflammation, organ damage (i.e., kidney)	Nausea, vomiting, liver/pancreas/lung inflammation, increased risk of infection, potentially increased cancer risk
Biologic Medications	Belimumab Rituximab Abatacept Others Available in Clinical Trials	Consider using for people with moderate to severe lupus involvement that does not improve significantly with other immunosuppressive medications; sometimes added to other therapies to better control very active lupus or allow steroids to be tapered off	Increased risk of infection, uncertainty about long-term side effects including any increased cancer risk