

# Systemic Lupus Erythematosus

**S**ystemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), also called **lupus**, is an autoimmune disorder in which the body's immune system (the cells in the body that fight infection) incorrectly attack the body's own tissues and organs, leading to inflammation and damage. Lupus most commonly affects women of childbearing age but also occurs in children, adolescents, and men. The cause of lupus is unknown, but it has been associated with genetic, environmental, and infectious causes. The disorder may affect almost all organs in the body. It may be mild in some cases (for example, involving only the skin) and very severe in other cases (affecting multiple organs, including the brain). The disease course is characterized by **flares** (intervals of active disease) and **remissions** (intervals of inactive disease). This Patient Page is based on one published in the June 22/29, 2005, issue of *JAMA*.

## SYMPTOMS

Because lupus can affect any organ of the body, it causes a wide range of symptoms. Some of the most common symptoms are

- Fatigue
- Fever (maximum temperature usually less than 102°F)
- Joint pain or swelling (most commonly in the hands, wrists, and knees)
- Muscle pain
- Hair loss
- Rash (typically in a "butterfly" distribution on the face, across the cheeks, and under the eyes)
- Painless ulcers in the mouth or nose
- **Photosensitivity** (development of a rash on sun-exposed skin)

## DIAGNOSIS

In addition to a complete medical history and physical examination, your doctor will order blood tests to measure your **red blood cells** (cells that carry oxygen in the blood), **platelets** (important for blood clotting), and **white blood cells** (the cells of the immune system). Your doctor may also order blood tests to assess for organ damage and to measure the extent of inflammation and autoimmune activity. Your doctor may refer you to a **rheumatologist** (a doctor with specialized training in autoimmune disorders).

## TREATMENT

There is no cure for lupus, but appropriate treatment can prevent or slow the disease process and control the associated symptoms. Lupus is treated with medications that target the body's immune system. Medication choices depend on the severity of disease and the specific organs involved. Additional medications may be prescribed for specific symptoms, such as joint pain, and for other manifestations of the disorder, such as high blood pressure if there is kidney disease.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Lupus Foundation of America  
[www.lupus.org](http://www.lupus.org)
- National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases  
[www.niams.nih.gov](http://www.niams.nih.gov)
- American College of Rheumatology  
[www.rheumatology.org](http://www.rheumatology.org)

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