

# Understanding lupus

The immune system plays a vital role in human health, protecting the body against invaders such as bacteria, viruses, fungi, and toxins. But what happens when something goes awry with the immune system?

According to Johns Hopkins Medicine, when the immune system functions effectively, it senses danger from a virus or infection and attacks it. However, healthy cells and tissues are sometimes caught in the crossfire during this immune response, resulting in an autoimmune disease.

Lupus is a relatively rare but potentially debilitating autoimmune disease. According to the Lupus Foundation of America, at least five million people across the globe have a form of lupus. Like all autoimmune diseases, lupus causes the immune system to attack healthy tissue. But lupus is more complicated than that, and understanding it may compel people who suspect they have lupus to seek treatment.

### What parts of the body does lupus affect?

The LFA reports that lupus most commonly affects the skin, joints and internal organs, including the heart and kidneys. When the immune system attacks healthy tissue due to lupus, people may experience inflammation in various body parts, leading to some very un-

comfortable symptoms.

### What are the symptoms of lupus?

The U.S. National Library of Medicine notes that lupus symptoms differ from person to person. That's because there are several kinds of lupus and each produces its own symptoms. For example, someone with discoid lupus may experience a red rash that does not go away. A person with subacute cutaneous lupus may develop sores after being out in the sun.

The LFA notes that there is no single first sign or symptom of lupus. Symptoms such as extreme fatigue, joint pain or a butterfly rash may or may not appear depending on the type of lupus a person has. When doctors are told about symptoms, they will then seek to diagnose the underlying problem, which may or may not be lupus. The USNLM notes that the following are some commonly reported symptoms of lupus:

- Pain or swelling in joints
- Muscle pain
- Fever with no known cause
- Butterfly rash, which is a red rash that appears most often on the face
- Chest pain when taking a deep breath
- Hair loss

- Pale or purple fingers or toes
- Sensitivity to the sun
- Swelling in legs or around eyes
- Mouth ulcers
- Swollen glands
- Feeling very tired

These symptoms can come and go, but it's vital that they're reported to a doctor immediately. They may or may not indicate the presence of lupus, but only a doctor can diagnose the problem promptly and correctly.

### What causes lupus?


The cause of lupus is unknown, though the LFA reports that experts believe it may develop in response to hormones like estrogen or environmental triggers that can bring on symptoms of the disease.

### Who is most vulnerable to lupus?

According to the LFA, nine out of 10 people with lupus are women, and women between the ages of 15 and 44 are at higher risk for the disease.

Lupus is a complicated disease that in many ways remains a mystery. More information about the disease is available at lupus.org.

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## Did You Know?

**A 2017 study published in the journal Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers and Prevention found that about one-third of women diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer in the United States live at least five years after diagnosis. Also known as stage IV breast cancer, metastatic breast cancer is the most advanced stage of the disease. Metastatic breast cancer refers to breast cancer that has spread beyond the breast and nearby lymph nodes to other parts of the body. Patients diagnosed with breast cancer also should know that improved treatments may further their chances of surviving a diagnosis, even a diagnosis of metastatic breast cancer. In fact, the American Cancer Society notes that survival rates are based on women who were diagnosed and treated at least five years earlier. In the time since those survival rates were documented, treatments could have advanced even further, potentially improving the five-year survival rates for metastatic breast cancer.**