

Lupus

Michael Curtin describes this debilitating disease and explains how homeopathy can be an effective treatment



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Lupus (systemic lupus erythematosus) is multisystem autoimmune disease. This means that the symptoms are caused by the immune system attacking the body, and almost every organ can be affected. Lupus (Latin for wolf) takes its name from the fact that it can cause rashes across the cheeks and nose, said to resemble the face of a wolf.

Although this can be a very difficult condition to treat because so many different parts of the body are involved, a holistic approach such as homeopathy may prove to be very effective.

Autoimmune disease

An autoimmune disease occurs when the body mounts an immune response against its own parts. Other examples of autoimmune diseases include Crohn's, diabetes, coeliac disease, thyroiditis, multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis.

The cause of these diseases is far from clear. Certain individuals may be predisposed to developing them and, with the exception of ankylosing spondylitis, women are more susceptible. Environmental factors almost certainly play a role, and it is notable that in areas of the world where infectious diseases are endemic, the incidence of autoimmune disease is significantly lower.

Common symptoms of lupus

Lupus usually starts with joint pains, especially in the small joints of the hands and feet, which may flit from one set of joints to another. Skin rashes are also common and these are often made worse when exposed to strong sunlight. Patients will usually have fever, malaise, weight loss and often feel completely exhausted and fatigue easily. Lymph glands in the neck and other parts of the body are often tender and swollen, and muscles may ache and become tender to the touch. All of these symptoms may be

caused by a number of different conditions, and lupus is often difficult to diagnose on the symptoms alone.

Who gets lupus?

Lupus affects mainly young women and is in fact nine times more commonly found in women. It is rare to make the diagnosis after the age of 60 although it can affect both sexes at any age. In Europe and America, it is much more common in women of Afro-Caribbean origin than in white women, although the condition is rarely found in Africa.

What causes lupus to develop?

The honest answer is that no one knows what causes an individual to develop lupus, and it is probable that this is a multifactorial disease. There is a genetic predisposition, for example if an individual is diagnosed with the condition there is a one in twenty chance that a sibling will develop lupus. This risk is increased to nearly one in three if identical twins are involved. Certain gene patterns have been identified which may make an individual more susceptible. A number of drugs including certain antihypertensives, antifungal agents and antibiotics may act as a trigger for developing lupus or a related condition. It is also possible that viruses may cause lupus to develop.

Which parts of the body can be affected?

Virtually any part of the body can be involved. Commonly affected organs are:

> Blood and lymphatic system

The bone marrow may be affected giving anaemia and a low platelet count which will cause tiredness and easy bruising. A specific antibody called antiphospholipid antibody may be present in the blood stream which can predispose to



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Lupus usually begins in the small joints of the hands and feet

blood clots and has been associated with an increased rate of miscarriage in pregnancy.

> **Joints**

Pain and swelling in the joints is common. Although this can be distressing, it is unusual for joint damage or long-term deformity to occur.

> **Skin**

Apart from the facial rash described earlier, the skin may become hypersensitive to sunlight (photosensitivity) and rashes often occur in areas which are more commonly exposed to the sun, such as the forearms and hands. Hair loss (alopecia) may occur although this is often mild and patchy and the hair usually re-grows.

> **Heart and lungs**

Rarely these organs are affected. More commonly the linings of the heart or lungs, the pericardium or the pleura may become inflamed giving pericarditis or pleurisy. Symptoms may include breathlessness or sharp pains on taking a deep breath.

> **Brain and nervous system**

Migraine may affect up to one in three people with lupus. Fatigue and depression are also frequently a problem.

> **Kidneys**

One in three patients with lupus may have some form of kidney disease. This is usually mild inflammation which rarely causes serious problems or significant damage to the kidneys, but does need to be monitored.

> **Other organs**

The digestive system and the eyes are less commonly affected.

Diagnosis

Although a lot is now known about this condition there is still no single diagnostic test. Specific antibodies in the blood are usually present and the detection of these antibodies in combination with the symptoms described earlier go towards confirming the diagnosis of lupus.

Conventional treatment

There is no known “cure” for this condition and conventional treatment is directed towards controlling the disease and its symptoms.

Non steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as Ibuprofen and Diclofenac are used to control joint pains. These drugs can have side-effects including irritating the stomach lining. Some of the newer NSAIDs, known as Cox-2 drugs, are less likely to irritate the stomach but may slightly increase the risk of heart attack and stroke.

Corticosteroids may be given to control pericarditis and inflammation of the kidneys (nephritis). These are very effective but in longer-term use may increase the risk of developing osteoporosis and diabetes. Steroids are therefore given in the lowest effective dose and ideally for short periods. Other drugs may be given to suppress the immune system during a flare up of lupus.

Contraception

There is evidence that oestrogen may cause lupus to flare up, and the progesterone only pill is considered to be a better option than the “combined pill” which contains both oestrogen and progesterone. Similarly the oestrogen found in hormone replacement therapy (HRT) may have the same adverse effects.

Pregnancy

The presence of antiphospholipid antibodies in the blood does give an increased risk of miscarriage and obstetricians will often recommend taking 75mg aspirin daily during the pregnancy. Expert

advice should always be sought regarding this.

A holistic approach

In conditions of this kind, where almost every organ and system may be affected, a holistic approach will always give the best results. The homeopathic approach involves taking account of all symptoms, physical, emotional and mental, and thus is well suited to treating a multi-system disease such as lupus.

Self help

Simple measures can often dramatically improve symptoms of lupus flare-ups and these may include:

> **Rest and relaxation**

Lupus can be exacerbated by stress and it is very important to lead a balanced life with a protected time built into each day for rest and relaxation.

> **Sun protection**

Many of the rashes and skin conditions which occur frequently with lupus are exacerbated by sunlight, and it is essential to limit sun exposure. A good quality sunscreen with at least factor 25 protection should be worn.

> **Avoidance of unnecessary exposure to infection**

Lupus can have an adverse affect on the immune system, and the immune suppressing drugs that are often used during symptom flare-ups can make the body even more susceptible to infection. Clearly we are continually exposed to viruses on the bus, train, in the workplace etc on a daily basis, and short of spending 24 hours a day in a bubble it is impossible to live in an infection-free environment. It is important however to take sensible precautions and avoid those family and friends with obvious known infectious diseases, especially chickenpox.

> **Diet**

A diet low in saturated animal fat may be helpful in reducing joint pains and inflammation and will certainly improve overall health and wellbeing. There is some evidence to suggest that fish oil supplements may be useful.

Health and homeopathy

George Vithoulkas, the eminent Greek homeopath, describes levels of health. A person whose health is in the uppermost level will experience no symptoms and enjoy perfect health and happiness.



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Some patients feel worse for heat especially in bed

Joint pains will be worse at night in bed, worse for cold and better for warmth.

A Pulsatilla patient will again present a different picture. She will be a soft gentle person who weeps easily and may be particularly tearful during flare-ups. She will require lots of comforting and consolation. One of the main characteristics of Pulsatilla is “changeability” and the aches and pains of lupus may be experienced as throbbing one day and stabbing the next.

The constitutional approach is usually the most effective when treating a multi-system disease such as lupus.

Local remedies

Flare-ups of lupus may affect different parts and organs at different times, and homeopathic remedies may be very useful in alleviating symptoms.

> Joint pains:

A large number of homeopathic remedies can help joint pains:

Aconite: sudden severe joint pains which may occur following exposure to a cold dry wind. Hot tender joints.

Apis: hot swollen red inflamed joints. Relieved by cold applications.

Bryonia: sharp stitching joint and muscle pain worse with even the slightest movement.

Dulcamara: joint pains occurring in cold damp weather, better with heat and motion.

Rhus tox: painful stiff joints, worse with initial movement (eg on rising from bed), better with continued motion.

Rhododendron: joint pain worse in wet weather, especially before a storm.

Ruta: stiff painful joints and tendons especially following overuse. Worse from cold and damp.

> Skin

Homeopathic medicines can be used to treat the cutaneous manifestations of lupus.

Apis: red burning rashes, often associated with fluid retention and swelling

(oedema). Better from cold applications.

Fluoric acid: hair loss especially alopecia areata.

Sepia: yellow/brown “saddle” across the bridge of the nose.

Sulphur: red itchy rashes. Worse with heat, especially the heat of the bed at night. Worse at night. Worse for bathing.

> Lungs

Pleurisy may develop during flare-up of lupus. The following remedies may be useful in helping to control the pain.

Aconite: sudden onset of sharp pains, especially after fright or shock. Worse after exposure to cold dry wind.

Bryonia: stitching pains (such as found in pleurisy) worse from the slightest movement.

> Migraine

Many homeopathic remedies are helpful in the treatment of these headaches.

Belladonna: intense throbbing head pains beginning in the right occiput and extending forwards to the right eye. Worse at 3.00pm. Worse with any jarring. Better lying still in a dark room.

Natrum muriaticum: bursting pain, sometimes described as a small hammer in one spot. Worse around 10.00am. Aggravated by sunlight.

Spigelia: stitching neuralgic pain on the left side in or above the left eye. Better with heat or hot bathing.

The cause of autoimmune disease remains unclear but the incidence and prevalence of these illnesses is clearly rising. This rise is mirrored by the increasing occurrence of atopic diseases such as asthma and eczema. Studies have shown that the use of antibiotics in the first twelve months of a child’s life can lead to a threefold increase in the risk of developing asthma. Is it possible that the drive to minimise our exposure and risk from infectious diseases is actually leaving our immune systems with nothing to do other than attack our own organs?

As we descend the levels, minor often self-limiting symptoms will develop. These are caused by exposure to environmental influences like viruses or stress. The immune system is able to deal with this and the symptoms resolve spontaneously. At this stage there is merely dysfunction of the organs and the body heals itself. Moving further down the levels, symptoms develop which don’t disappear and chronic disease takes hold. Good homeopathic prescribing on a constitutional level can prevent this deterioration in health.

Constitutional treatment

Individuals can be classified according to the characteristic reaction patterns of body. For example, somebody who has a phosphoric constitution will experience pain as a burning sensation. These individuals are very anxious and indeed may become overwhelmed and “burnt out” by their anxieties.

Thus a Phosphorus patient who develops lupus will have a tremendous anxiety about her health, will be very fearful, especially when alone and is particularly frightened of thunderstorms. The pains in her joints and muscles will be described as “burning”. Pain in other parts of the body (eg migrainous headaches) will also have a burning quality.

A patient with a Nux vomica constitution will experience the same disease in a very different way. She is usually a very driven ambitious person who may lie awake at night worrying about her business affairs, and will become very angry and frustrated with her illness. Typically, relapses in the condition will follow periods of overworking and stress.



Michael Curtin MB ChB DIP MED AC MFHom is a GP with a special interest in complementary medicine. He has a private practice in homeopathy and acupuncture, with clinics in Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire.