



# livingwell with lupus



Lupus Canada

*Working together to conquer lupus*



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### **What is lupus?**

Lupus is a chronic disease caused by inflammation in one or more parts of the body. It is estimated that it affects more than 50,000 Canadians.

Lupus is not contagious and is not related to AIDS or cancer. It belongs in the family of diseases that includes rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, juvenile diabetes and scleroderma.

The most common type of lupus is systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE).

It is a complex and baffling condition that can target any tissue or organ of the body, including skin, muscles, joints, blood and blood vessels, lungs, heart, kidneys and the brain.

There are other types of lupus that mainly affect the skin. A few individuals develop drug-induced lupus as a response to some medications used to treat other conditions. These symptoms disappear when the person stops taking the medication.

### **Who gets lupus?**

Anyone can: women, men and children. Between ages 15 and 45, eight times more women than men get lupus. In those under 15 or over 45, both sexes are affected equally.

### **What causes lupus?**

The cause remains unknown. What we do know is that, in lupus, the immune system (the body's defense against viruses and bacteria) is unable to tell the difference between intruders and the body's own tissues. Trying to do its job, it attacks parts of the body, causing inflammation and creating the symptoms of lupus.

Because it occurs most often in women of childbearing age, there may be a link between lupus and hormones, but how this works remains uncertain. Genetic factors may make certain people more likely to develop lupus, but these also are not clear yet.

Until science fully understands how the immune system works, the specific cause of lupus remains unknown.

It is important to know that:

- while lupus is a serious condition, in most cases it can be treated and controlled;
- lupus often goes in cycles, with periods of time in which symptoms may disappear completely;
- diagnosis and treatment are improving, allowing people with lupus to live increasingly active and productive lives.

### **What are symptoms of lupus?**

Each person's experience of being diagnosed, treated and living with lupus is very different.

Lupus can target any of the body's tissues, and is often hard to diagnose. That's why it is called "the disease with a thousand faces".

Lupus can begin with flu-like symptoms along with severe fatigue, a sudden unexplained loss or gain in weight, headaches, hair loss, hives, high blood pressure, or changes in the colour of fingers in the cold.

A person with lupus may experience some of the following symptoms:

- Joint pain, sometimes with swelling, redness and heat
- A red rash across upper cheeks and bridge of the nose
- Extreme fatigue
- An unusual reaction to sunlight
- A red scaly skin rash
- Small ulcers inside the nose or mouth
- Chest pain, worse when lying down or inhaling
- Swelling of feet and legs, weight gain
- Seizures or severe neurological symptoms
- Hematologic abnormalities and the presence of autoantibodies in the blood

This is far from a complete list of symptoms, and the diagnosis of lupus must be made by a doctor.

### **Living with lupus: what to expect**

A chronic illness, lupus is different for each individual, but it often appears in cycles, which can consist of:

- a "flare", with severe acute symptoms needing medical attention;
- a "chronic" phase, when symptoms may continue but are less severe;
- a "remission", when symptoms may disappear completely for long periods, but can return.

### **What about treatment for lupus?**

While there is no cure yet, with treatment, most people with lupus can look forward to a normal life expectancy. The treatment plan will depend in part on the type and severity of symptoms.

There are many medications that can control symptoms. Medications may have side effects, and,