

Lupus: Frequently Asked Questions

What is Lupus?

Lupus (LOOP-us) is a chronic autoimmune disease that causes your body to “fight” against itself. Normally your immune system produces proteins called “antibodies,” which protect the body from “foreign invaders” like viruses, bacteria, germs and infections. However, when you have lupus, your immune system can’t tell the difference between these invaders and your healthy tissue, so it begins to wage a battle against itself.

“Chronic” means that signs and symptoms tend to last longer than six months (and often longer).

“Autoimmune” means your immune system cannot tell the difference between “foreign invaders” and your body’s healthy tissue. As a result, it attacks and damages healthy tissue.

Lupus can range from mild to life-threatening and should always be treated by a doctor. With good medical care, most people with lupus can lead a full life.

How is lupus diagnosed?

There are many challenges to diagnosing lupus. The disease is known as “the great imitator” because its symptoms mimic many other illnesses. The symptoms of lupus can also be unclear, come and go, or change over the course of the disease.

A physician will review the following while evaluating a lupus diagnosis:

- ▣ Your symptoms.
- ▣ Your medical history.
- ▣ Your test results.
- ▣ Your family’s (grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins) medical history.

There is no single test for lupus. The test you will hear most about is called the antinuclear antibody (ANA) test. A positive ANA test along with other tests or physical changes in your body helps your doctor determine if you have lupus. Each test result adds more information to the picture your doctor is forming of your illness.



If multiple diagnostic criteria are present, a physician may reach a lupus diagnosis. However, if symptoms present gradually over time, the diagnosis may not be as obvious. In these cases, further consultation with a rheumatologist may be needed.

Are there different types of lupus?

There are four different types of lupus: systemic lupus erythematosus, lupus affecting the skin (cutaneous), drug-induced lupus and neonatal lupus.

- ▣ **Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE)** accounts for approximately 70 percent of all cases of lupus. In approximately half of these cases, a major organ in the body, such as the heart, lungs, joints, kidneys or brain will be affected.¹
- ▣ **Lupus affecting the skin (Cutaneous)** accounts for approximately 10 percent of all lupus cases.¹
- ▣ **Drug-induced lupus** accounts for about 10 percent of all lupus cases and is caused by certain medications. Some of the symptoms of drug-induced lupus are similar to systemic lupus; however, symptoms eventually end after the medications are stopped.¹
- ▣ **Neonatal lupus** is a rare condition in which the mother’s antibodies affect the fetus. At birth, the baby may have a skin rash, liver problems, or low blood cell counts, but these symptoms typically disappear completely after six months with no lasting effects.

Who does lupus affect?

The Lupus Foundation of America estimates that 1.5 million Americans, and at least five million people worldwide, have a form of lupus.² People of all races and ethnic groups can develop lupus, but lupus strikes mostly women of childbearing age. However, men, children, and teenagers develop lupus too. Most people with lupus develop the disease between the ages of 15 and 44.¹

For more information, visit [Resources.Lupus.org/entry/Facts-and-Statistics](https://www.lupus.org/entry/Facts-and-Statistics)

What causes lupus?

Many (but not all) scientists believe that lupus develops in response to a combination of factors both inside and outside the body, including hormones, genetics, and the environment.

How is lupus treated?

Lupus symptoms vary from one person to another. Your healthcare team will work with you to tailor treatment to your specific condition.

What type of doctor treats lupus?

A rheumatologist, a doctor who specializes in diseases of the joints and muscles, generally treats people with lupus. If lupus has caused damage to a particular organ, other specialists should be consulted. For instance, a dermatologist for skin disease (cutaneous lupus), a cardiologist for heart disease, a nephrologist for kidney disease, a neurologist for brain and nervous system disease, or a gastroenterologist for gastrointestinal tract disease. A woman with lupus



who is considering a pregnancy needs an obstetrician who specializes in high-risk pregnancies.

Is it contagious?

Lupus is not contagious, not even through sexual contact. You cannot “catch” lupus from someone or “give” lupus to someone.

Is it related to cancer?

Lupus is not like or related to cancer. Lupus is an autoimmune disease, whereas cancer is a condition of malignant, abnormal tissues that grow rapidly and spread into surrounding tissues. However, some treatments for lupus may include immunosuppressant drugs that are also used in chemotherapy.

Is it like HIV or AIDS?

Lupus is not like or related to HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) or AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). In HIV or AIDS, the immune system is underactive; in lupus, the immune system is overactive.

Citations:

1. Pons-Estel GJ, Alarcón GS, Scofield L, Reinlib L, Cooper GS. [Understanding the epidemiology and progression of systemic lupus erythematosus](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.semarthrit.2008.10.007). *Semin Arthritis Rheum*. 2010 Feb;39(4):257-68. doi: 10.1016/j.semarthrit.2008.10.007. Epub 2009 Jan 10. Review.
2. GfK Roper. (2012). *Lupus Awareness Survey for the Lupus Foundation of America [Executive Summary Report]*. Washington, DC

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