



Lupus Foundation
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Heart Disease among Women with Lupus

Women with lupus are at great risk of developing heart disease. Several studies have confirmed that women with lupus have a five- to ten-fold increased risk of coronary heart disease compared to the general population, especially women with lupus who are younger than 55. Ninety percent of people with lupus are women and the 80 percent of new cases of lupus develop among women ages 15-44.

Researchers compared cardiovascular risk factors in women with lupus to groups of equally matched healthy women. Although the groups were matched for age and other factors, the women with lupus were more likely to have risk factors traditionally associated with heart disease, including hypertension, and higher levels of triglycerides, low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol and homocysteine, an amino acid found in the blood. These factors are associated with inflammation caused by lupus and likely contribute to the increased risk of coronary heart disease.

Several decades ago, when women with lupus died shortly after developing lupus, their deaths were attributed to previously undiagnosed and untreated active lupus. But when they died years after their diagnosis of lupus, the cause of death was attributed to atherosclerotic heart disease. Atherosclerosis is now considered an inflammatory disease and lupus is the prototypic inflammatory disease. Inflammation plays a major role in causing atherosclerosis, which results when fatty deposits, cholesterol and other materials accumulate in the blood.

The combination of atherosclerosis and lupus greatly increases the risk of cardiovascular disease among women. A lupus flare or autoimmune response may cause inflammation to blood vessels. Inflammation stretches clogged arteries, causing tears in the artery walls and allowing blood clots to form. These clots can block blood supply to the heart and can trigger a heart attack.

Researchers are studying potential therapies that will reduce the risk of heart disease in women with lupus, including cholesterol-lowering drugs and aspirin therapy. However, women with lupus also can take more traditional steps to lower their risk: lose weight, stop smoking, lower blood pressure and homocysteine levels, and get moderate aerobic exercise.

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