



Lupus in Men

Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) is an autoimmune disease. These are diseases in which people develop antibodies against their own cells, resulting in tissue damage. The tissues in the body become inflamed and trigger a wide range of symptoms. The disease can be mild or life threatening and its cause is still unknown. Lupus most commonly appears in women of childbearing age, for reasons unknown; around nine times more females than males have lupus. Because of this, most of the research and literature about lupus is geared towards women. This can leave men who have the disease with less information and support. Lupus organisations around the world are trying to redress this imbalance.

Lupus and gender

Types of lupus include:

- **Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE)** - SLE can affect any tissue or organ and can produce a wide range of symptoms. No two people with SLE will experience the same manifestations of the disease. SLE is the type of lupus that is more common in women.
- **Discoid lupus erythematosus (DLE)** - DLE (or discoid) is confined to the skin. Symptoms include reddened and scaled patches of skin that may induce hair loss (alopecia) if they appear on the scalp. Most people with DLE are sun sensitive. DLE is the type of lupus that is more common in men. DLE may be a manifestation of SLE.
- **Drug-induced lupus** - certain medications can provoke SLE-like symptoms, which then disappear once the medications are stopped. Drugs that are known to cause lupus-like symptoms include certain hypertensive (high blood pressure) medications and drugs for heart abnormalities. Men are more likely to experience drug-induced lupus because they take more of these particular medications than women. Some researchers suspect that genetic susceptibility may play a **significant role**.

The significance of sex hormones

Women are more prone to lupus than men, and lupus ratios between the genders show a clear pattern from puberty to old age. These factors indicate to many researchers that sex hormones may play a role in the development of the disease. The principle hormones under investigation include the female hormone oestrogen, which is made by the ovaries and triggers ovulation every menstrual cycle, and the male hormones called androgens that are responsible for masculine physical characteristics. Research findings include:

- Both oestrogen and androgens may be metabolized differently in people with lupus than in the general population.
- Women with lupus metabolize androgens much faster than women without the disease.
- Low levels of male hormones at pre-puberty and old age may contribute to the incidence of autoimmune diseases in males of these age groups.

Progression of the disease

The symptoms of SLE are much the same for both women and men at the onset of disease. Research is divided on whether SLE progression differs between the sexes. Most researchers consider the course of disease as the same, but some preliminary studies suggest that men are more likely than women to experience damage to the kidneys, nervous system and vascular system.

Coping with having a 'woman's disease'

Men may react differently from women when the diagnosis of lupus is given. This may be because of the misconception that lupus is a "woman's disease" giving rise to the idea that a man with lupus is less masculine than his colleagues without lupus. **This is not true.** As far as sex hormones and sexual function are concerned, most

men with lupus are no different from those without lupus. Men with lupus are usually sexually active, potent and have normal reproductive histories. There may be some interruption in this when the disease is very active or with the use of certain drugs, especially cyclophosphamide which can affect fertility.

Many of the day-to-day stresses in life are emotionally equal for men and women with lupus. However, in some ways it may be more difficult for men to cope with having lupus because of the pressures created by what they think their family, friends and society expect of them. They may not be able to work or follow hobbies in the environment previously expected of them (e.g., in the cold due to Raynaud's phenomenon). There may be difficulties in performing activities that require physical strength and a change of role in the workplace may be necessary but not available. Historically it has been the male who is the provider for the family. If a man with lupus has to stop working or change job this may result in significant financial and emotional stress. However, with earlier diagnosis and better treatment, many patients can remain in work, although some will have to change job, modify duties, or reduce their hours compared with their colleagues. Combined advice from an occupational health physician at the workplace and the lupus physician may be required to establish what is appropriate work for an individual with lupus. Similarly, lupus patients may have to discuss with their family and consultant how to adjust their leisure activities and hobbies, as it is essential that they get enough rest and remain as physically and emotionally fit as possible.

Another aspect of the disease that men (and women) have to cope with is the change in physical appearance. Rashes, unexpected hair loss and weight loss or gain may not be appreciated as being as important to men as to women. However, they may result in further loss of self esteem and the feeling of loss of masculinity, particularly in young men. More serious problems such as disability are even harder to cope with and may cause profound depression that needs active treatment as well as physical rehabilitation by physiotherapists.

Since most people with lupus are women, men may feel they don't belong in female-oriented support groups. They can appreciate one-to-one informal chats more than taking part in predominantly female meetings. The above stresses, coupled with the fact that lupus is commonly referred to as a "woman's illness," only makes it more difficult for males to cope with this chronic disease. Lupus associations recognize this lack of support for men and are working to redress the imbalance.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- A specialist (often a dermatologist, rheumatologist, nephrologist or immunologist)
- Lupus Foundation of Grenada

Things to remember

- Lupus (systemic lupus erythematosus or SLE) is an autoimmune disease.
- Men are more likely to develop discoid lupus or drug-induced lupus.
- Around nine times more females than males have lupus.

Conclusion

Men, like women, will need to discuss their lupus disease and its likely effects on their health and lifestyle with their consultant. Every case is different but certain generalizations will be possible based on the clinical picture (the parts of the body affected) and the results of blood tests and other investigations. There is no definite evidence that the disease is more severe in men than women, or that men with lupus have more female hormones or less male hormones than those without lupus. Fertility is not usually affected but active disease and certain drugs may affect sexual function and this needs to be discussed openly by the patient and his physician.

Article Sources

Lupus Australia Foundation
The Lupus Site (UK)