

Women's Health Disparities: Lupus

- ▶ **90% of the 1.5 million** individuals in the U.S. with lupus are women ages 15-44.¹
- ▶ Lupus is **2 to 3 times** more prevalent in racial and ethnic minority populations than in white populations.¹
- ▶ Lupus is one of the **top 20 leading causes of death** for women ages 5-64.²



Lupus is a chronic autoimmune disease in which the body's immune system attacks its own tissues and organs, causing widespread inflammation and damage. Currently, there is no cure for lupus.

Typically, when people speak of lupus, they are referring to **systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE)**, the most common type of lupus, accounting for 70% of all cases.¹ SLE can impact multiple organs, including the heart, lungs, kidneys, skin, and brain.

There are three other types of lupus:

- ▶ **Cutaneous lupus erythematosus** affects only the skin, however, this type of lupus can occur along with SLE or even progress into SLE.
- ▶ **Drug-induced lupus** is caused by exposure to certain medications. This lupus presents with symptoms similar to SLE that usually resolve when the medications are discontinued.
- ▶ **Neonatal lupus** is a result of antibodies that pass from mother to child during pregnancy and may impact the baby's heart, liver, and skin. Typically, symptoms go away within 6 months and do not return.

Lupus patients from racial minority populations have more abrupt disease onset, more severe disease, and worse outcomes. These patients also tend to be diagnosed with lupus at a younger age and have higher mortality rates. African American individuals with SLE have a 2-3x higher risk of mortality than Caucasian individuals.³



Lupus is often misdiagnosed because its symptoms are similar to other common rheumatic diseases and tend to develop and change over time. There is no single diagnostic test for lupus, and up to 62% of patients are misdiagnosed before receiving an accurate diagnosis.⁴

Common Symptoms

- ▶ A butterfly-shaped rash on the cheeks and nose
- ▶ Fatigue
- ▶ Hair loss
- ▶ Headaches
- ▶ Low-grade fevers
- ▶ Pain or swelling in the joints
- ▶ Sensitivity to sunlight or fluorescent light
- ▶ Sores in the mouth or nose
- ▶ Swelling in the hands and feet or around the eyes

Risk Factors¹

The exact cause of lupus is unknown; however, several factors can increase the likelihood of developing lupus, including:

- ▶ **Age:** Most people develop lupus between 15 and 44 years of age.
- ▶ **Family history:** Relatives of individuals with lupus have a 5-13% chance of developing lupus, however, only 5% of children will develop lupus if their mother has it.
- ▶ **Mental Health:** Psychosocial stress, anxiety, depression, and PTSD are associated with an increased risk of SLE.
- ▶ **Race/Ethnicity:** Lupus is 2-3x more prevalent in individuals from racial and ethnic populations.
- ▶ **Sex:** Females are 9x more likely than males to develop lupus.



Women who have lupus are at a greater risk of developing:

- ▶ Certain cancers (especially if taking immunosuppressing medications)
- ▶ Lupus nephritis (complications of lupus that result in kidney damage)
- ▶ Other autoimmune diseases or chronic health conditions
- ▶ Preeclampsia and other pregnancy complications

Caregivers

Caregivers play a critical role in improving the quality of life for an individual living with lupus. They support by assisting with personal care, managing medications, attending medical appointments, and utilizing available resources to promote the best health outcomes for their loved one. Because lupus symptoms can flare up and change over time, the level of support needed at the onset of the disease might change significantly as a patient ages or as the disease progresses. As a result, caregivers themselves can face a range of challenges and report increases in stress levels and decreases in socialization, paid work time, and productivity when caring for someone with lupus.⁵

Economic Impact

- The average annual direct health care costs of a patient with lupus is **\$33,223**, and lost hours of economic productivity can be up to **\$20,000** per year.⁶
- **55%** of patients report a complete or partial loss of their income because they are no longer able to work full-time due to complications of lupus.⁷
- **1 in 3** people living with lupus have been temporarily disabled by the disease, and **1 in 4** currently receive disability payments.⁷

Women's Health Equity Initiative

The Society for Women's Health Research Women's Health Equity Initiative aims to raise awareness, educate the public and policymakers, and address longstanding disparities in women's health care access and outcomes. The initiative highlights statistics on disease states, life stages, and issues that disproportionately affect women in the United States and engages communities on solutions to improve health equity for women from diverse races, ethnicities, geographies, ages, and roles throughout society.

- ▶ For more resources about Lupus and women, visit www.swhr.org.



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