



Dermatology Patient Education

Lupus and Your Skin

Lupus can affect many organs in your body. Your skin is considered an organ, and lupus can affect your skin. About two-thirds of people who have lupus will develop skin changes. Many of these people have a type of lupus that primarily affects the skin. Some people who have systemic lupus, the kind that affects the entire body, also develop skin disease.

HOW DOES LUPUS AFFECT THE SKIN?

When lupus affects the skin, it often causes a rash or sores. Different types of lupus cause different rashes and sores.



DLE flare

Discoid lupus erythematosus (DLE)

- Coin-shaped, red and scaly patches, most often on the face and scalp, and in the ears, but can develop anywhere on the skin.
- These spots are often tender to the touch.
- As the skin heals, spots and sometimes scars appear.
- Patches can remain on the skin for long time, causing the skin to thicken. Patches often look like warts or skin cancer.
- Sores inside the mouth, nose, or eyelids

Subacute cutaneous lupus erythematosus (SCLE)

- Red, thick, scaly skin, which usually forms on arms, shoulders, neck and trunk. Fewer patches on the face.
- Sometimes, SCLE causes red, ring-shaped sores that have scaly edges.
- Rash often mistaken for psoriasis.

Acute cutaneous lupus erythematosus (ACLE)

- Areas of red skin that look like a sunburn or blushing.
- When this rash spreads across the nose and cheeks, it can take the shape of a butterfly and is called a "butterfly rash."
- Rashes that look like sunburn also appear on arms, legs, and trunk.
- People who have systemic lupus can develop this rash when lupus flares.

Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE)

- When the SLE flares, areas of red skin can appear that look like a sunburn or blushing.
- A butterfly rash can appear.

Sometimes lupus damages the blood vessels, and the effects are seen on the skin. A condition known as Raynaud's phenomenon is more common in people who have lupus. Raynaud's phenomenon restricts blood flow, resulting in the tips of the fingers or toes turning white, red, or blue in response to cold or stress. Some people also experience numbness, tingling, or pain when they feel cold or stressed.

Other signs that appear on the skin when lupus involves the blood vessels include:

- Blue or purplish lacelike pattern on the skin, usually on the legs
- Reddish-purple spots or bumps, especially on the lower legs
- Knots and sores, especially on the lower legs

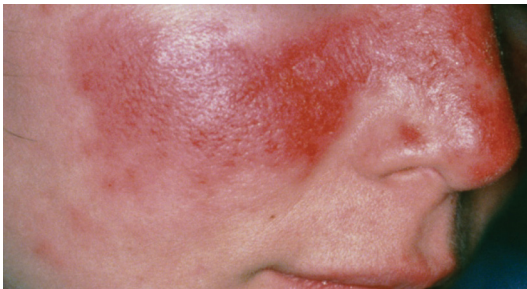
Hair Loss

Lupus also can cause hair loss. A condition called "lupus hair" occurs in patients who have the most common type of lupus, systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE). When SLE causes a severe flare-up, the hair becomes fragile and breaks. The short strands that remain are referred to as "lupus hair." When the lupus flare-up subsides, the hair regrows.

Some people who have DLE, a type of lupus that primarily affects the skin, can have hair loss when a rash forms on the scalp. If the scalp scars as the rash clears, the hair loss will be permanent. Early treatment of the rash can prevent permanent hair loss.

HOW DOES A DERMATOLOGIST TREAT LUPUS ON THE SKIN?

When lupus affects the skin or scalp, a patient often sees a dermatologist for treatment. Treating the skin helps to prevent problems such as scars and permanent hair loss. Clearing the skin can even help prevent kidney diseases that can develop in people who have lupus.



ACLE flare

Before prescribing treatment, a dermatologist will ask for your medical history and perform a physical exam. Some medical tests also may be necessary. Most treatment plans include:

- Medicine to treat the skin disease
- Tips to reduce flare-ups

HOW DOES A DERMATOLOGIST TREAT LUPUS ON THE SKIN?

Many medicines are available to treat skin disease caused by lupus.

To clear a rash, your dermatologist may prescribe a corticosteroid that you can apply to your skin. This medicine can reduce the redness, swelling, and scales. It also calms the overactive immune system that causes lupus. To prevent side effects from long-term use of this medicine, most patients use a corticosteroid for a short time or occasionally.

Other medicines may be prescribed for you to apply to your skin. These include tacrolimus ointment, pimecrolimus cream, and a retinoid.

If you have a patch of skin that is very thick, your dermatologist may inject a corticosteroid directly into the patch.

Sometimes systemic (works throughout the body) medicine is prescribed. This includes prednisone, antimalarial drugs, retinoids, thalidomide, methotrexate, and azathioprine. These medicines help calm an overactive immune system. This, in turn, helps to clear the skin.



SCLE lesions

HOW CAN I REDUCE FLARE-UPS?

Sunlight, smoking, and even the type of light bulbs you use can make lupus flare. What causes your lupus to flare depends on many factors, including the type of lupus you have. Your dermatologist will offer tips that can help you reduce flare-ups. Some tips that often help patients with lupus are:

Protect your skin from the sun. Most people find that their lupus worsens when their skin is exposed to sunlight. Research shows that applying a sunscreen every day can reduce flare-ups. The sunscreen should be applied at least 15 minutes before going outside. Be sure to generously apply a sunscreen that offers:

- Broad-spectrum protection (UVA and UVB protection)
- SPF 50

If you spend time in the sun or use tanning beds, stop. These activities can make lupus much worse. In some cases, it can even lead to organ failure.

If you smoke, quit. It is well known that smoking can worsen lupus. Smoking also can prevent some medicines from treating the lupus.

Before taking a medicine, ask the doctor prescribing it whether it can cause sun sensitivity. Some medicines make your skin more sensitive to sunlight. The antibiotic, tetracycline, is one such medicine. If you are concerned that the medicine could make your skin more sensitive to sunlight, ask if there is another treatment option.

It is important to fit these tips into your lifestyle. The tips can help you avoid serious side effects from lupus, including long-term skin problems and kidney disease. These tips also can reduce your need for medicine used to treat the skin.

WHY SHOULD I SEE A DERMATOLOGIST?

When rashes and sores from lupus clear, they can leave unwanted side effects. Some people have dark or light spots on their skin. Some people have scars. If this occurs and bothers you, talk with your dermatologist. Your dermatologist can treat these, too.

You also should make an appointment to see your dermatologist if you notice anything growing, bleeding, or otherwise changing on your skin. These can be signs of skin cancer. People with DLE have a higher risk of getting skin cancer, especially in the scars from old DLE spots. With early detection and treatment, skin cancer has a high cure rate.

A dermatologist is a medical doctor who specializes in treating the medical, surgical and cosmetic conditions of the skin, hair and nails. To find a dermatologist in your area visit aad.org or call toll free (888) 462-DERM (3376).

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