Lupus is a chronic inflammatory condition that can affect many different parts of the body. It is an autoimmune disease — the damage is the result of 'friendly fire' by the body’s own immune system.

The immune system operates with a multitude of agents that normally attack and destroy invading bacteria, viruses, other microorganisms and any other foreign substances. In an autoimmune disease, the immune system mistakes some of its own tissues as the enemy and attacks them. In lupus, this can include the skin, joints, blood, gastrointestinal tract and organs.

The word lupus means 'wolf' — because many sufferers develop a butterfly-shaped rash over the cheeks and nose that give them a wolf-like appearance.

There are three main types of lupus — systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), discoid lupus erythematosus (DLE) and drug-induced lupus erythematosus (DILE). Other kinds of lupus are lupus nephritis, an inflammation of the kidneys, lupus pernio, a feature of sarcoidosis and lupus vulgaris, a feature of skin tuberculosis.

SLE can be mild or life-threatening, depending on whether a vital organ, such as the brain, heart or lung, is affected. Its milder forms can involve fever, fatigue, mood changes, joint pain and other symptoms.

DLE is less serious because it primarily affects the skin, with the characteristic butterfly rash over the nose and cheeks. There may also be lesions on the scalp, ears and other places which may persist on and off for years. DLE is more disfiguring than dangerous.

Drug-induced lupus usually subsides when the person stops taking the causative drug.

Both SLE and DLE typically have flare-ups followed by periods of remission when the person may believe they have recovered from the disease. The flare-ups can be quite sudden and without any obvious explanation.

About nine out of 10 sufferers are women, mainly younger women between about 15 and 40 years of age. Lupus also tends to be more prevalent in coloured people than in white-skinned people.

HOW LUPUS SHOWS UP

The attack by the immune system on the body’s own tissues produces inflammation of the skin and other tissues and organs in various parts of the body. These may be the joints, blood vessels or vital organs.

It is quite common for the first symptoms to resemble those of arthritis with swelling and pain typically in the fingers, hands and wrists. Or the first symptom of lupus may be a fever. The characteristic red rash may develop over the cheeks and nose, and there may be red, scaly lesions on other parts of the body and in the mouth. There may be weight loss.

Around half the people with SLE develop inflammation of the kidneys (nephritis), and in the most serious cases other vital organs and central nervous system can be affected.

If the lungs are involved, the surface membrane is commonly inflamed (pleuritis). Similarly there may be inflammation of the surface lining of the heart (pericarditis). If the blood is involved, there may be anaemia and reduction in the white blood cells of the immune system. Damage to the central nervous system can lead to cognitive problems, headaches, strokes, seizures, and/or dementia.

About one patient in three develops ulcers in the mouth and nose. The skin may become sensitive to sunlight and the hair may thin.

Sufferers of lupus become more susceptible to infectious diseases, partly because the production of white blood cells is compromised and also because the immune system becomes sensitive to light, sores in the mouth, the butterfly rash, and disk-shaped lesions.

Discoid lupus affects mainly the skin. Besides the characteristic butterfly rash on the face, there may also be skin lesions on the scalp, ears and other areas, and these may persist for years. DLE is considerably less serious than SLE and is not necessarily dangerous. As stated above, it is mainly disfiguring.

MEDICAL DIAGNOSIS

Some time ago, the American College of Rheumatology came up with eleven symptoms and signs to be used for the diagnosis of SLE. If four of these eleven are present, the diagnosis is likely to be lupus. Of these eleven, four relate to the skin — sensitivity to light, sores in the mouth, the butterfly rash, and disk-shaped lesions.

Another four are to do with inflammation in certain areas, namely the joints, the central nervous system, the kidneys and the lining of the lungs or heart. The remaining three signs are to do with abnormalities of the blood.
THE CAUSES ARE NO MYSTERY

The modern fashion is blame genes for many disorders, but do they really cause disease? There is a connection between certain genes and autoimmune diseases, but this association is usually weak, as is the case with lupus. The standard rule applies — genes rarely cause a particular disease, but they predispose the person to that disease. Almost invariably it is other factors that play the critical role in producing the disease. In the case of lupus, these factors include infections, heavy metals, synthetic chemicals, ultraviolet light, nutritional deficiencies, modern diet, medications and emotional stress.

Bacteria And Viruses

Some doctors believe the cause of lupus to be an as yet unidentified virus, but it is obvious that their understanding of degenerative diseases is very limited. However, bacteria, viruses and other microorganisms can stimulate certain cells of the immune system and cause them to become overactive. In this way, they can make a contribution to the development of lupus.

Heavy Metal Toxicity

Heavy metals like mercury can bind to proteins, including enzymes and those in cell membranes, and alter their function, thus possibly inviting autoimmune attack.

Synthetic Chemicals

Chemicals that may exacerbate SLE include aromatic amines that are commonly used in hair dyes, silicone implants, silica dust, the yellow food dye, tartrazine (shown on food ingredient lists as additive no. 102 and capable of causing allergic reactions and contributing to cancer) and a maze of industrial chemicals.

Ultraviolet Light

The UVA and UVB rays in sunlight are a distinct risk for lupus. Although not all sufferers are photosensitive, some find that flare-ups are produced by exposure to sunlight, and this can apply even on cloudy days. To determine if UV rays directly cause flare-ups, the simplest way is trial and error.

Modern Diet and Nutritional Deficiencies

When the antibodies of the immune system attack foreign substances (antigens), the resulting antigen-antibody complexes lodge in various tissues and cause inflammation. This is why the disease is capable of affecting so many different tissues and organs in the body. The rich Australian diet — high in calories, fats and protein — is excessively loaded with food antigens. The more food antigens present, the more antigen-antibody complexes that will be formed. The proteins in beef and dairy products in particular form potentially harmful complexes of the kind that have been found in the blood of lupus sufferers. In fact, the majority of sufferers have high levels of antibodies to beef proteins in their bloodstream.

In his book, McDougall's Medicine, Dr John McDougall explains that lupus is much less common in Chinese people living in China than in Chinese people who move to Hawaii and adopt the rich American diet. A very surprising possible contributor to lupus is alfalfa sprouts. They contain canavanin which can affect protein and possibly lead to an autoimmune response. Why such a nutritious food should contain a harmful substance is a mystery. Nutritional deficiencies that may in a subtle or non-subtle way contribute to lupus include:

Zinc — critical for proper immune system function;
Selenium — necessary for enzymes that protect the immune system against oxidative damage;
Copper — important for the immune system and a certain protective enzyme;
Vitamin C — has a major bearing on the immune glands that modify the immune response;
Vitamin E — an important antioxidant protecting fats and cholesterol and necessary for proper immune function;
Vitamin B6 — prevents high homocysteine levels which can disrupt immune system control mechanisms;
Essential fatty acids — have significant protective effects against many diseases including lupus.

Breastfeeding

This has been found to protect against the development of autoimmune diseases later in life.

Leaky Gut

Because leaky gut allows incompletely digested food particles to enter the bloodstream, this condition sets the stage for a host of possible health problems. As might be expected, leaky gut is associated with liver dysfunction and also lupus. It appears that leaky gut causes the entire system to develop toxicity to some degree which can manifest as any of a myriad different conditions.

The causes and healing protocols for leaky gut were described in the Summer 2005/06 issue of this magazine, page 20.

Medical Drugs

A wide range of medical drugs has been linked to lupus. Some can cause it outright, while others may exacerbate existing lupus.

Considering the latter first, lupus may be exacerbated by antibiotics (particularly sulphur drugs and tetracycline), oral contraceptives, oral diabetic agents, cimetidine (sold as Tagamet) that suppresses stomach acid, and sulphur-based medications. Normally a doctor would recommend that any person with lupus-like symptoms discontinue taking such drugs in order to see if the drug is exacerbating the symptoms.

For drug-induced lupus, there are many drugs that can be the causative agent. A list of 48 drugs that fit this category is published by the Life Extension Foundation (see 'Sources of Information' at end of article), which gives advice about the prevention and treatment of disease "based upon thousands of research studies and the clinical experience of physicians around the world".

Examples of the drugs listed are Voltaren, Ibuprofen, Isoniazid, Levodopa, Lovastatin, Dilantin, Minipress, streptomycin sulphate, tetracycline and oral contraceptives.

Stress

Flare-ups in lupus can be triggered by physical stress in the form of fatigue, pregnancy or childbirth.

Emotional stress is also capable of producing flare-ups, whether due to work, relationships or other sources. Even particular moods can be a trigger.

Check out the new NHS website

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OVERCOMING LUPUS
Orthodox medical treatment for SLE uses drugs to suppress inflammation or to suppress the immune system. As with almost all drugs, these have side effects.

The most powerful drugs to treat inflammation are steroids such as cortisone. In life-threatening lupus, steroids are regarded as critical intervention.

Much milder are non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) which the Life Extension Foundation says are an excellent substitute for steroids if they will provide sufficient suppression of SLE. They include aspirin, Ibuprofen, Naprosyn and Indocin, and are less expensive and safer than steroids.

Immu-no-suppressive agents are used in life-threatening cases and are virtually a form of chemotherapy. Because of their toxicity, they should be employed only when other treatments are ineffective.

Interestingly, anti-malarial drugs can be effective with SLE if it is not too serious. Although they take months to reach full effectiveness, the anti-malarials suppress inflammation, protect the skin from UV damage and inhibit blood clotting.

The lifestyle approach with lupus is based on the fact that, as with any disease, the starting point is to minimise the causes and apply preventive methods, otherwise the disease can be expected to progress. Lupus is a classic example of what medical researchers concluded years ago, namely, that almost all the health problems in Western society are diseases of lifestyle. In a way, this is good news because if disease is inherited there is nothing we can do about it, but as it is a matter of lifestyle, this can be changed and there is the prospect of recovery, sometimes even full recovery.

A lot of the necessary lifestyle changes can be deduced from the causes listed above. The biggest single group of causes lies in nutrition.

Preventive Nutrition
The everyday diet needs to be low in calories, low in fat, low in protein and low in salt. By lowering calories, protein and especially saturated fat to the amounts needed and no more, this can cause a significant reduction in the number of antigen-antibody complexes. Minimising saturated fat allows the blood to maintain low viscosity so that it can reach and properly nourish every cell in the body. When tissues and organs are properly nourished, they are better able to carry out their normal functions.

Because antigen-antibody complexes tend to 'clog up' the kidneys, the low-antigen diet will tend to save the kidneys from damage. High intakes of protein and salt both place a heavy burden on the kidneys, so reducing protein to the minimum necessary level and avoiding table salt entirely will remove this burden.

Unsaturated fat is the kind of fat the body requires, although still in modest quantities. The most unsaturated of all fats, omega-3 fats, especially if high in EPA and DHA, inhibit inflammation by inhibiting a fatty acid that is abundant in red meats arachidonic acid. Flax seed, which is rich in the omega-3, alpha-linolenic acid, has been found to help prevent renal problems in SLE.

Dr John McDougall's recommendation for lupus is a healthy diet containing no animal products, so that it is low-fat, no-cholesterol and abundant in the protective nutrients that plants supply. He states that he has seen sufferers improve considerably on this kind of diet.

What the body needs most is an abundance of green, yellow and red vegetables for their supply of antioxidants and alkaline minerals. Garlic and onions are excellent inclusions for their sulphur content and other benefits.

Fresh fruit is fine. Particularly include ripe pineapple for its enzyme, bromelain, which is excellent for reducing inflammation. The grains to include are brown rice and oatmeal, while the ones best to avoid are wheat-flour products.

Fibre is normally abundant in a plant-based diet, although it could help to top up with a supplement such as psyllium hulls. Avoid the nightshade vegetables because their solanine content can contribute to inflammation. Also avoid alfalfa sprouts.

Some things are particularly difficult to exclude from the diet because they are widely consumed in modern society. A short list of these is flesh foods, dairy products, refined sugar, caffeine and salt.

Detoxification
A detoxification program in the form of exclusive juice diets or exclusive fruit-and-salad diets has shown benefit for lupus sufferers. It has been observed repeatedly at Natural Health centres that, when the body's levels of toxic substances are lowered, inflammation decreases or fades away. There have been cases of lupus sufferers - not all cases - experiencing considerable benefit at the Hopwood Health Retreat at Wallacia, NSW (see page 22), with which the Natural Health Society is closely affiliated. Any significant detoxification program should be carried out under professional supervision.

Look for Food Sensitivities and Allergies
If improved diet and detoxification don't bring clear improvement, there may be a problem with food sensitivities or allergies. Dr McDougall's 'Elimination Diet' is designed to track these down. Commence the elimination diet by consuming foods that are least likely to cause any reaction.

About one week on these foods is necessary to clear the system of foods consumed previously. Suitable foods are brown rice, rice flour, puffed rice, sweet potatoes, winter squash, summer squash, cooked beetroot, carrots, celery, artichokes, string beans, spinach, lettuce, asparagus and cooked fruits. Cooking of fruits is preferable in this situation because cooking makes the proteins less likely to act as allergens. Suitable fruits are peaches, apricots, plums, prunes, cherries, paw paw and cranberries. Avoid citrus fruits to which some people react, and exclude all spices and condiments. The only acceptable beverage is water.

At the end of this introductory week, continue on the same foods but add one new food, consumed on an empty stomach in large amounts for two or three days. See if this causes a reaction. If it doesn't, it can be considered 'safe' and included in the normal diet. Then introduce another new food and test it in the same way.

If a food does produce a reaction, exclude it and wait 4 to 7 days before introducing the next test food.

Assuming that diary products, eggs and flesh foods are to be excluded from the normal diet, a suggested list of foods to test is as follows: wheat, corn, citrus fruits, oats, soya and other beans, peas or lentils, potatoes, onions and green capsicum.

Dr McDougall concludes his explanation of the elimination diet by saying that for many people dramatic improvement is achieved simply by eliminating dairy products and eggs.

Nutritional Supplements
The Life Extension Foundation recommends different supplements for different purposes in the body in relation to lupus.

For reducing inflammation, the Foundation strongly recommends omega-3 essential fatty acids from flax oil or fish oil, accompanied by the omega-6 essential fatty acid, gamma-linolenic acid (GLA), from evening primrose oil or borage oil. Needless to say, in a vegetarian diet flax oil would be used rather than fish oil. Because flax oil does not contain the important EPA and DHA, it would be desirable to take a supplement of DHA which would enable the body to increase levels of both. Also recommended are the hormones, DHEA and testosterone, which are strictly on medical prescription (if available in Australia).

For improving immunity - which commences in the intestines - it is desirable to supply supplements of the
friendly gut bacteria, specifically *Lactobacillus acidophilus* and *bifidobacteria*. These supplements are particularly important if antibiotics have been taken. Building up these bacteria will increase the absorption of properly digested food through the intestinal wall.

The liver, being the body's chemical laboratory and detoxifying organ, has a major role for the immune system in that it clears waste products, drugs and other toxic chemicals from the bloodstream. One of the supplements that particularly improves liver health is the herb, *milk thistle*.

The damage caused by environmental chemicals through the production of free radicals is well known to be reduced or prevented by antioxidants. While the best sources of these are fresh vegetables, fruits and some other plant foods, topping up with antioxidant supplements can be beneficial. Vitamin C is water soluble and protects the blood and tissue fluids. Vitamin E and the carotenoid family are fat soluble and protect fat and cholesterol in the body. Carotenes convert in the body to vitamin A which is another important antioxidant. Selenium and zinc are the important antioxidant minerals. Co-enzyme Q10 protects the energy-producing part of the cell from oxidation, and grapeseed extract also contains powerful antioxidants.

The practitioners' text, *Prescription for Nutritional Healing* (see 'Sources of Information'), presents a long list of appropriate supplements for lupus. The main nutrients mentioned in addition to those above are calcium and magnesium, the amino acids, L-cysteine, L-methionine and L-lysine, vitamin-B complex, a multi-mineral, garlic and sea kelp. The comment is made that mild cases of lupus respond well to supplements that build up the immune system.

Whenever supplements are taken, it is important to follow the manufacturer's directions. However, where supplements are being taken to promote self-healing with a specific disease, it is strongly recommended that the guidance of a practitioner be sought.

### Herbs
A herbalist may suggest herbs such as golden seal, Echinacea, feverfew, pau d'arco, red clover and milk thistle. Two precautions with these herbs are that golden seal should not be taken for more than a week at a time and Feverfew should not be taken during pregnancy.

The taking of herbs is a specialised area and requires the guidance of an experienced practitioner.

### Adequate Rest
Adequate rest and sleep are important, but it is equally important not to rest for too long. It is a case of balancing rest and activity for best result.

### Physical Activity
Regular aerobic exercises, such as walking or swimming, build endurance and help prevent the muscle atrophy which can occur with SLE. Muscle building can be further assisted by a weight-training program.

If joints are inflamed, exercise should be conducted in a way that does not increase the inflammation of the joints.

### Easing Stress
Easing emotional stress and improving mood make a significant contribution to improving auto-immune diseases. Simple relaxation techniques, such as meditation, yoga, relaxation tapes and positive attitude, can make a huge difference to stress levels, enhancing the functioning of most bodily systems and particularly the immune system.

### SOURCES OF INFORMATION
- *Gentle Medicine - Thorson's Concise Encyclopaedia of Natural Health* 1994, by Angela Smith
- *Good Health in the 21st Century* 2006, by Dr Carole Hungerford

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