

Lupus Foundation of America, Inc.

## What I Need to Know About Lupus Treatments

For most people with lupus, proper treatment can minimize symptoms, reduce inflammation and pain, and stop the development of serious organ damage. Once you have been diagnosed with lupus, your doctor will develop a treatment plan based on age, lupus symptoms, general health, and lifestyle. However, it can take months, and sometimes years, before your health care team finds the right combination of medicines to keep your lupus symptoms under control. The goals of any treatment plan are to:

- ❖ reduce inflammation caused by lupus
- ❖ suppress your overactive immune system
- ❖ prevent flares and treat them when they occur
- ❖ control symptoms like joint pain and fatigue
- ❖ minimize damage to organs

### What Are the Medications Used to Treat Lupus Symptoms?

Many classes of drugs exist for the treatment of lupus. Of all these drugs, only a few are approved specifically for lupus by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA): corticosteroids, including prednisone, prednisolone, methylprednisolone, and hydrocortisone; antimalarials, such as hydroxychloroquine; belimumab (Benlysta®), a monoclonal antibody approved in March 2011; and aspirin. However, many medications are used to

Treating  
LUPUS

# Treating LUPUS

*If you are taking steroids, be sure to clean and protect any open wounds, as infections are one of the leading causes of death in people with lupus.*

## What I Need To Know About Lupus Treatments

treat the symptoms of lupus. Be sure to discuss all medications with your doctor before you begin to plan a pregnancy, as some medications can be dangerous to the mother or the child, and some can affect fertility.

### Anti-Inflammatories

Anti-inflammatory drugs help to relieve many of the symptoms of lupus by reducing inflammation and pain.

**Aspirin** is inexpensive and available over the counter. It reduces pain and inflammation, and acts as an anticoagulant to help prevent blood clots that can be caused by lupus. However, aspirin can cause stomach irritation.

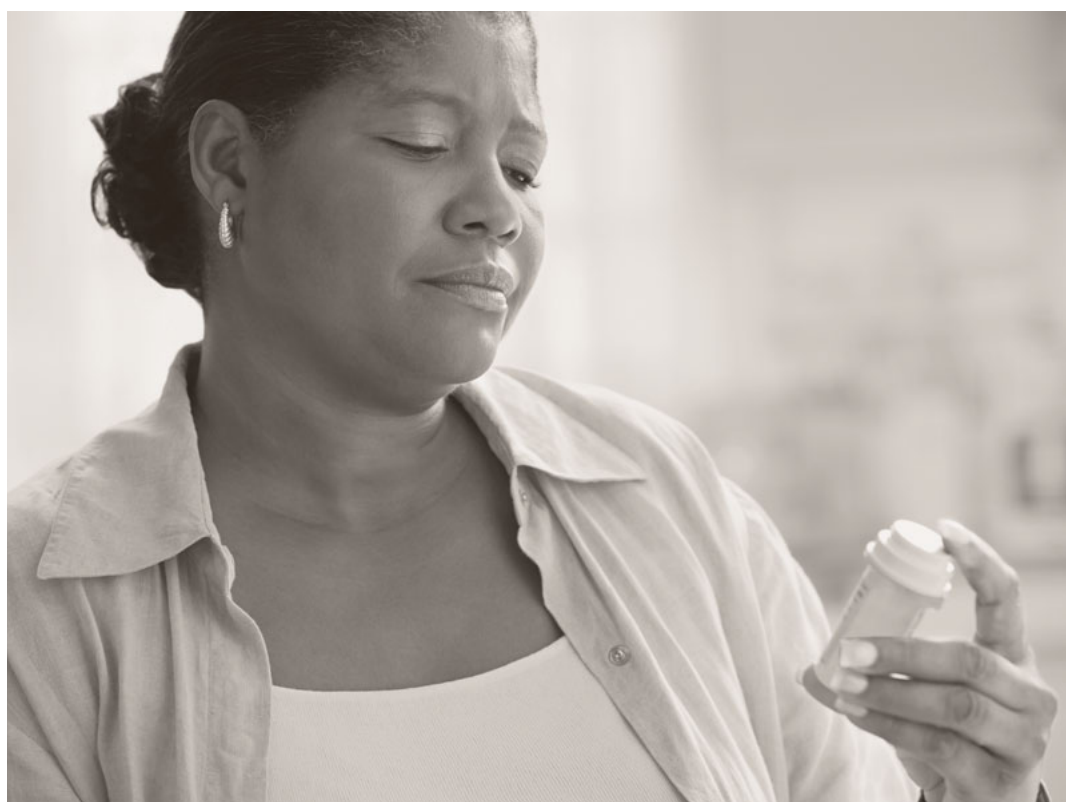
**Acetaminophen** is known to most people as Tylenol® and is used to reduce pain. Although it causes less stomach irritation than aspirin, acetaminophen does not help with inflammation and cannot control any of the disease activity of lupus.

**Non-Steroidal Anti-inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs)** suppress inflammation and are especially useful for joint pain and stiffness. However, NSAIDs can cause stomach irritation. You should always be cautious when taking any type of NSAID, as excessive amounts can reduce blood flow to your kidneys which may interfere with their ability to remove waste from your body.

### Corticosteroids

Corticosteroids (also known as glucocorticoids, cortisone, or steroids) work quickly to decrease the swelling, warmth, tenderness, and pain often associated with inflammation. Prednisone is the most commonly prescribed steroid for lupus. Once the symptoms of lupus have responded to treatment, the steroid dose is gradually reduced (tapered).

The most common side effects from steroids are changes in appearance, such as acne, a round or moon-shaped face, weight gain due to increased appetite, hair growth, and easy bruising. Steroids can also cause irritability,



agitation, excitability, or depression. These changes in appearance and mood are more apparent with high doses of steroids.

Long-term use of steroids can cause destruction of bone tissue, osteoporosis caused by loss of bone mass, muscle weakness, cataracts, or suppressed growth in children. However, the greatest danger is an increased risk of infections.

If you are taking steroids, be sure to clean and protect any open wounds, as infections are one of the leading causes of death in people with lupus.

### Antimalarials

Antimalarials are used in combination with steroids and other drugs in part to reduce the dose required of the other drugs. Antimalarials also protect against the damaging effects of ultraviolet light and improve skin lesions. Unlike the rapid response seen with steroids, antimalarials may take months to have an effect. Hydroxychloroquine (Plaquenil®) and chloroquine (Aralen®) are the two types of antimalarials used for lupus.

Side effects from antimalarials are rare and usually mild, and include upset stomach and changes in skin color. In high doses certain antimalarial drugs may damage the retina of the eye, causing vision problems, so you should see an ophthalmologist (eye doctor) regularly.

### Immunosuppressives (Immune Modulators)

Immunosuppressives are used to control inflammation and an overactive immune system. However, these drugs reduce your body's ability to fight off infections, and increase the chances of developing viral infections such as shingles (the same viral infection as chicken pox). It is extremely important that you pay attention to even the smallest cut or wound, and let your doctor know if any sign of infection begins, such as redness, swelling, tenderness, or pain.

In addition, each immunosuppressive drug has unique side effects.

**Cyclophosphamide (Cytoxan®)** was developed to fight cancer. It can improve kidney and lung disease, but can affect a woman's menstrual cycle and can cause bladder problems, hair loss, and sterility.

**Methotrexate** was also developed to fight cancer. It improves joint pain and stiffness. However, it can cause sun-sensitivity, liver damage, including cirrhosis, and lung infections. If you are taking this drug you should not drink alcohol, especially if you have a history of kidney disease. If you are taking high-dose methotrexate you should not be using NSAIDs; caution is also advised when you take aspirin. Nausea, mouth sores, and headaches are the most common side effects of methotrexate.

**Azathioprine (Imuran®)** was developed to prevent rejection of kidney transplants. It helps to lower steroid dosage and improves liver and kidney disease. However, it may cause pancreatitis and an allergic form of hepatitis, so liver function tests and blood counts should be done regularly.

**Leflunomide (Arava®)** was developed to treat rheumatoid arthritis and seems to help with the arthritis caused by lupus. Side effects may include diarrhea, elevated liver enzyme levels, hair loss, rash, sores in the mouth or nose, or easy bruising or bleeding.

### Anticoagulants

Because blood clots can be a life-threatening symptom of lupus, anticoagulants are used to thin your blood to prevent it from clotting too easily. Anticoagulant drugs include low-dose aspirin, heparin (Calciparine®, Liquaemin®), and warfarin (Coumadin®). In particular, if you are taking warfarin you must have careful monitoring by your doctor to ensure that your blood does not become too thin.

*Many medications are not recommended if you are planning a pregnancy, currently pregnant, or breast-feeding. Every pregnancy should be closely monitored by your health care team.*

# Treating LUPUS

What I Need To Know About Lupus Treatments

## Other Medications

People with lupus often require other drugs for the treatment of conditions commonly seen with the disease; for example, diuretics for fluid retention; antihypertensive drugs for high blood pressure; anticonvulsants for seizure disorders; antibiotics for infections; and bone-strengthening drugs for osteoporosis.

Many drugs are not recommended if you are planning a pregnancy, currently pregnant, or breast-feeding. Every pregnancy should be closely monitored by your health care team.

## The Best Approach to Taking Medications

Medications used to treat lupus range in strength from mild to extremely strong, and often several drugs are used in combination to control the disease. However, all drugs have side effects that need to be monitored. Your physician needs to know of any and all side effects that occur, as changes in dosage or medication may be required.

An effective way to track a complex disease like lupus is with a daily medical diary or journal, kept by you or a trusted family member or friend who can go with you to your doctor appointments. Details about medications, such as dosage and side effects, can be recorded, as well as questions to ask at your next appointment.

Managing lupus is a team effort. And since there often are several physicians involved in your care, good communication is necessary among members of your health care team.



## What Do I Need to Know About Complementary and Alternative Medicines and Therapies?

In addition to prescribed medications and medical care, you might learn about other healing practices or diverse therapies.

Lupus is a complex disease and no one with lupus should rely on complementary or alternative practices instead of the medications and other medical care prescribed by physicians. You should contact your doctor if you are considering changing or adding to your treatment plan in any way.

### Remember to:

*Keep a daily medical diary or journal.*

*Write down questions to ask at your next doctor's appointment.*

*Maintain good communication with all members of your health care team.*

Help Us Solve  
The Cruel Mystery  
**LUPUS**<sup>TM</sup>  
FOUNDATION OF AMERICA

*The Lupus Foundation of America is the only national force devoted to solving the mystery of lupus, one of the world's cruelest, most unpredictable, and devastating diseases, while giving caring support to those who suffer from its brutal impact. Through a comprehensive program of research, education, and advocacy, we lead the fight to improve the quality of life for all people affected by lupus. Contact the LFA or a chapter that serves your area to find out how you can become involved in our mission and how we can help you. For more information call 1-800-558-0121.*

Reviewed 0313 | 2000 L Street, NW, Suite 410 | Washington, DC 20036 | [www.lupus.org](http://www.lupus.org) | ©2013 Lupus Foundation of America Inc.