

# Lupus Facts Sheet

**What is Lupus?** Lupus is a chronic, autoimmune disease that occurs when your body's immune system attacks your own tissues and organs. Lupus causes inflammation that can damage any part of the body including your skin, joints, and/or organs inside the body.

**How prevalent is it?** Research estimates that at least 1.5 million Americans have Lupus. More than 16,000 new cases of Lupus are reported annually across the country. While anyone can get Lupus, 90% of people diagnosed with Lupus are women. In addition, Lupus disproportionately affects women of color (three times more than Caucasian women).

**Common Symptoms (same for males and females):** People with lupus can have a wide range of symptoms including: extreme fatigue, hair loss, headaches, anemia, abnormal blood clotting, painful or swollen joints, skin rashes, and kidney problems. Some symptoms of lupus can be transient such as joint and muscle pain, a rash caused or made worse by sunlight, low-grade fevers, hair loss, appetite loss, sores in the nose or mouth, or painful sensitivity of the fingers in cold environments.

**How is Lupus diagnosed?** Lupus can be difficult to diagnose because its signs and symptoms often mimic those of other ailments. The most distinctive sign of lupus — a facial rash that resembles the wings of a butterfly unfolding across both cheeks — occurs in many but not all cases of lupus. A physician will carefully review the following while evaluating a lupus diagnosis: your current symptoms, your laboratory test results, your medical history, and the medical history of your close family members (grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins.) A variety of laboratory tests are used to detect physical changes or conditions in your body that can occur with lupus. Each test result adds more information to the picture your doctor is forming of your illness. However, for a number of reasons listed below, laboratory tests alone cannot give a definite "yes" or "no" answer: No single laboratory test can determine whether a person has lupus. Test results that suggest lupus can be due to other illnesses or can even be seen in healthy people. A test result may be positive one time and negative another time. Different laboratories may produce different test results. If multiple criteria are present simultaneously, a physician—a family practitioner, internist or pediatrician—may reach a lupus diagnosis. If, however, as is often the case, symptoms develop gradually over time, the diagnosis may not be as obvious, and consultation with a rheumatologist may be needed.

**Important things to remember:**

- ◆ Lupus is not contagious, not even through sexual contact. You cannot "catch" lupus from someone or "give" lupus to someone.
- ◆ Lupus is not like or related to cancer. Cancer is a condition of malignant, abnormal tissues that grow rapidly and spread into surrounding tissues. Lupus is an autoimmune disease, as described above.
- ◆ Lupus can range from mild to life-threatening and should always be treated by a doctor. With good medical care, most people with lupus can lead a full life.

**For more information visit:** [www.lupus.org](http://www.lupus.org), [www.couldihavelupus.gov](http://www.couldihavelupus.gov), [www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com)

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**Mission:** To empower American Indian and Alaska Native women and families to build happy, healthy communities.