

# Symptoms of Lupus



*Recognising, tracking, and managing your  
symptoms*



# How lupus affects the body<sup>1-6</sup>

## What is lupus?

Lupus (systemic lupus erythematosus or 'SLE') is a chronic autoimmune condition where the immune system mistakenly attacks healthy tissue, leading to inflammation and damage.

It can affect almost any part of the body including the skin, joints, blood, kidneys, lungs, heart, and brain.

There are many other forms of lupus such as cutaneous lupus (affecting skin), drug-induced lupus and neonatal lupus (affecting babies). Symptoms vary depending on the type of lupus and the tissues involved.

## What causes lupus?

SLE develops in genetically susceptible people when exposed to environmental triggers, such as viral infections. These triggers cause the immune system to produce antinuclear antibodies – proteins that target healthy cells instead of protecting them.

This immune misfiring keeps the body's defences on high alert – even when there's no infection to fight.

## Why do symptoms vary?

No two people experience lupus the same way. Symptoms can:

- Come and go unpredictably
- Change over time
- Range from mild to severe

Some people may only experience fatigue and joint pain, while others have serious organ involvement.

This variability is partly due to how the immune system stays overactive in lupus, even when there's no infection to fight.

## What are lupus flares?

A **flare** is when symptoms suddenly worsen or new symptoms appear.

Due to the cyclic nature of lupus, people often experience periods of flares and **remission** (where symptoms improve or disappear).

Flares can often be triggered by things like stress, infections, or UV exposure.

Recognising your triggers and tracking your symptoms can help reduce how often or how severely they occur.

# Common lupus symptoms<sup>5-7</sup>

Many symptoms of lupus can be non-specific, meaning they are often seen in other conditions, making it challenging to diagnose and treat.

## Common signs and symptoms

- Fatigue
- Fevers
- Weight gain or loss
- Poor appetite

Lupus is not confined to one specific area of the body and can impact multiple organs and systems.

Hence why it is called a 'systemic' disease.

## It can look like:

### Neurological

- Headaches or migraines
- Dizziness, confusion or memory problems
- Brain fog



### Muscles & Bones

- Muscle weakness
- Stiffness in joints
- Aching muscles



## Respiratory

- Chest pain when taking a deep breath



## Blood

- Bleeding or bruising easily
- Infections
- Anaemia or low white blood cell count



## Eyes

- Dry eyes
- Eye redness
- Vision changes



## Skin

- Rashes
- Sensitivity to light
- Mouth or nose sores
- Hair loss



## Gastrointestinal

- Nausea or vomiting





## Lupus and skin<sup>8-11</sup>

### How does lupus affect the skin?

Skin changes can occur with both SLE and cutaneous lupus (CLE). CLE is lupus affecting the skin, with varying types, each presenting differently.

Rashes or sores often appear on sun-exposed areas like the face, scalp, chest, neck, or arms and may be light-sensitive.

Common skin symptoms seen in lupus:

- Dry, chapped lips
- Blister-like rashes
- Lace pattern on the skin (livedo reticularis)
- Small “depressions” in the skin
- Itchy hives
- Red palms (palmar erythema)
- Firm, painful lumps under the skin
- Poor blood flow in fingers and toes (Raynaud’s phenomenon)

### Why lupus rashes vary

Lupus can inflame deeper layers of the skin, hair follicles, and small blood vessels. This is why rashes vary from person to person and hair loss and nail changes can also occur.

Some rashes come on quickly during a flare, others gradually, and can leave areas of darker or lighter pigmentation as they resolve.

### What does a lupus rash look like?

- Butterfly rash on face (malar rash)
- Thick, scaly patches on the face or scalp (discoid lupus)
- Dark or light spots with scarring as discoid lesions heal
- Ring-shaped or widespread sun-sensitive rashes on the chest, shoulders, or arms (subacute CLE)

### Treating lupus

A dermatologist may prescribe topical creams or medicines to help treat rashes or sores. Your specialist and care team will develop the most suitable treatment plan that works for you and monitor for any side effects, which you may experience.



## Other lupus symptoms<sup>5</sup>

Not all lupus symptoms are obvious. You may feel like something's wrong but struggle to describe it or worry that it's "all in your head." It's not.

Some symptoms can leave people feeling unheard, but they are a real part of lupus.

If a symptom is persistent, concerning, or simply doesn't feel right, it's worth getting checked out by your GP.

### Less obvious symptoms worth knowing

- Persistent mouth or nose ulcers that won't heal
- Raynaud's phenomenon (fingers or toes turning white, blue, or red triggered by cold or stress)
- Hair thinning or bald patches
- Tingling, numbness, or burning sensations
- New-onset anxiety, depression, or mood changes
- Balance issues, coordination problems, or seizures
- Ongoing nausea, bloating, or abdominal pain
- Dry eyes or mouth

Some of these symptoms may point to complications with the nervous system, gut, or mucosa (mouth or nose). Others can be early signs of disease in less visible parts of the body.

### What's normal, what's not?

You don't need to tick every symptom to have lupus. Likewise, not every new symptom means your lupus is worsening.

If you've sought help and aren't getting the answers you'd hoped for, it's okay to ask more questions or seek a second opinion.

You're not being dramatic or difficult. Your experience is valid. Trust your gut.



# Managing your symptoms

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## Symptom-tracking matters

Recognising changes in your symptoms can help you:

- Spot early signs of a flare
- Understand how lupus affects your day-to-day life
- Optimise your care by sharing insights with your doctor & healthcare team

Write down when your symptoms start, how long they last, and how they make you feel. Even quick notes on your phone or in a notebook can help you track patterns over time.

## It's not always lupus...

Not all symptoms are caused by lupus itself. Some may be due to:

- Medication side effects
- Comorbidities like thyroid issues or anaemia
- Other conditions (eg. Sjögren's syndrome or fibromyalgia)

Your doctor can use your symptom record to work out whether a symptom is related to lupus or something else.

## Warning signs to watch for



Some symptoms are less common, but can signal more serious complications.

Lupus nephritis is a complication of lupus involving the kidneys, causing damage and affecting their ability to filter waste and regulate blood pressure.

**You should seek medical attention right away if you experience:**



**Chest pain or shortness of breath**



**Sudden changes in vision or speech**



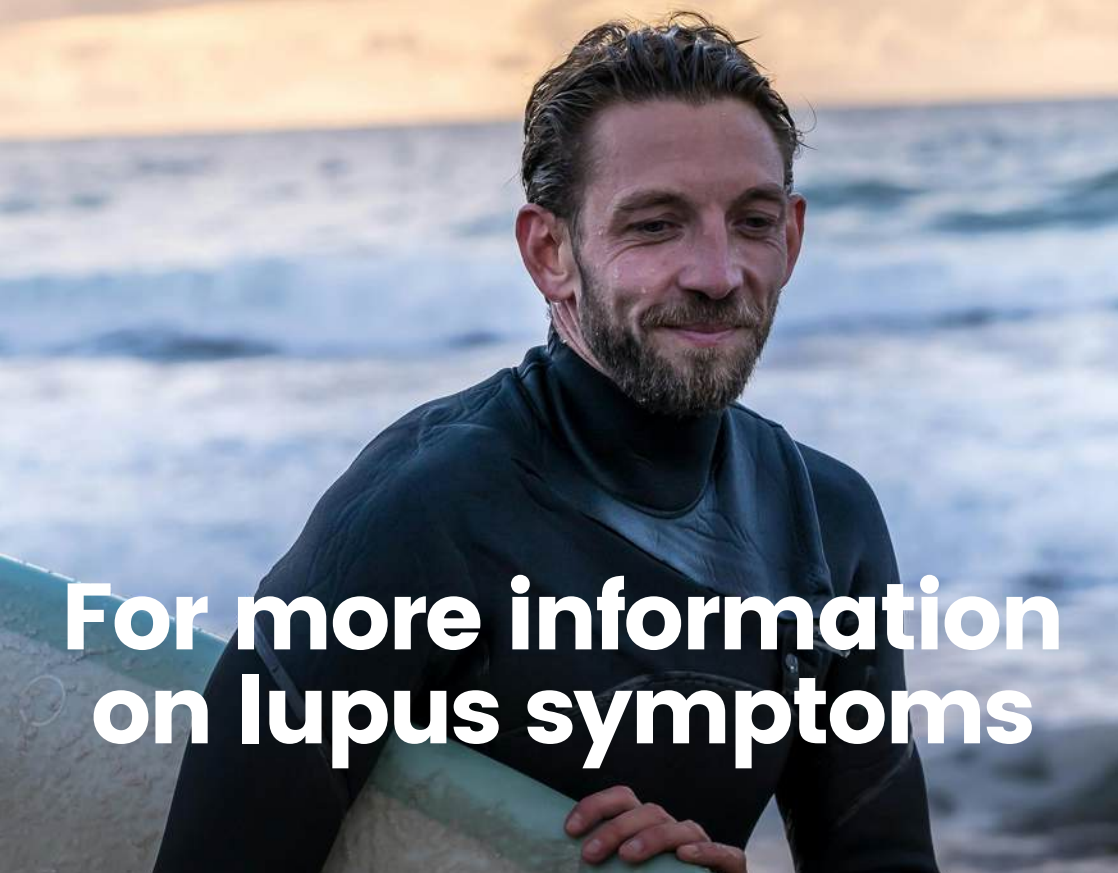
**Frothy or bloody urine & swelling in legs or feet**



**Fever, accompanied by feeling very unwell**

**Tracking your symptoms helps you learn what's normal for you  
— so you can act quickly if you detect any warning signs.**





# For more information on lupus symptoms

Please visit The Lupus Foundation of Australasia at:  
[www.lupusfoundationaustralasia.org/understanding-lupus](http://www.lupusfoundationaustralasia.org/understanding-lupus)

**References:** 1. Moulton VR et al. Pathogenesis of Human Systemic Lupus Erythematosus: A Cellular Perspective. *Trends Mol Med* 2017;23(7):615-635. 2. BMJ Best Practice. *Systemic lupus erythematosus*. Accessed 2026. 3. Justiz Vaillant AA et al. *Systemic Lupus Erythematosus*. Florida: StatPearls Publishing 2023. 4. Dai, X et al. Systemic lupus erythematosus: updated insights on the pathogenesis, diagnosis, prevention and therapeutics. *Signal Transduction and Targeted Therapy*. 2025;10(102). 5. Lupus Foundation of America. *Lupus symptoms*. Accessed 2026. 6. Lupus Foundation of America. *The Expert Series: Managing and preventing flares*. Accessed 2025. 7. Lupus UK. *The Symptoms*. Accessed 2026. 8. John Hopkins Lupus Center. *Lupus Signs, Symptoms, and Co-occurring Conditions*. Accessed 2026. 9. American Academy of Dermatology Association. *Lupus and your skin: Signs and Symptoms*. Accessed 2026. 10. DermNet. *Systemic Lupus Erythematosus*. Accessed 2026. 11. Lupus Foundation of America. *How Lupus Affects the Skin*. Accessed 2026. 12. Lupus Foundation of America. *Common Symptoms of Lupus*. Accessed 2026. 13. Lupus Foundation of America. *What is lupus nephritis*. Accessed 2026.

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