Lupus (systemic lupus erythematosus)

Lupus is what's known as an autoimmune condition. In these types of conditions, the body's immune system produces antibodies that attack a person's own healthy tissue as if it was a foreign body, like bacteria or a virus. Lupus is a complex condition that affects different people in different ways. It may affect joints and skin. It can also affect blood vessels and internal organs.

Around one in every 900 people in New Zealand is diagnosed with lupus. It's more common in Māori and Pacific peoples and in other ethnic groups with darker skin. It can occur in men, women and children, but it's much more common in women.

Symptoms and signs of lupus

Lupus has many symptoms and can show in different ways, so it can be very hard to diagnose. It can also seem like several other conditions. Key symptoms of lupus include:

- joint and muscle aches and pains
- rashes, including a butterfly-shaped rash on your cheeks (shown in the picture on the right)
- tiredness and weakness
- recurring flu-like symptoms
- headaches, migraines
- ulcers in your mouth or nose
- dry eyes
- hair loss
- depression.

If you have some of these symptoms, visit your GP for further assessment. Your GP will ask questions and may examine you. They may also perform blood tests and check your blood pressure and urine. If they feel that you might have lupus, they are likely to refer you to a rheumatologist.

Treating lupus

There is no cure for lupus but you can manage and control it with medication and lifestyle changes. People with lupus now have a normal life expectancy.

You will sometimes have a flare-up of symptoms. Environmental factors such as hormones and hormonal contraception, sunlight and UV light, and certain medications can trigger flare-ups.

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