



SUBACUTE LUPUS ERYTHEMATOSUS (SCLE)

What are the aims of this leaflet?

This leaflet has been written to help you understand more about subacute lupus erythematosus. It tells you what it is, how it can be treated, and where you can find out more about it.

What is subacute lupus erythematosus?

Lupus erythematosus covers a group of related conditions, all of which can affect the skin. It includes systemic lupus erythematosus which can affect any system of the body. However, there are forms of lupus which chiefly affect the skin. (See also the separate British Association of Dermatologists Patient Information Leaflet on this website for further information on discoid lupus erythematosus) One of these is subacute lupus erythematosus.

What causes subacute lupus erythematosus?

Lupus erythematosus is a form of auto-immune disease; the body's immune mechanisms, which are designed to protect against infection, attack the body's own tissues. The precise cause is unknown. It is commoner in women than men. Sun exposure can trigger the rash. Sometimes the condition can be sparked off by drug therapy, including some diuretics (water tablets); however

you should not stop any medication you are on without discussing this with your doctor. The condition is not infectious.

Is subacute lupus erythematosus hereditary?

Sometimes lupus erythematosus and related conditions run in families but this is rare. If you have subacute lupus erythematosus and become pregnant, antibodies from your blood can cross the placenta and affect your baby causing a rash and sometimes a slow heartbeat. (See below under 'What can I do?').

What are the symptoms of subacute lupus erythematosus?

Most people feel fit and well, however some may notice fatigue and weakness, sometimes with flu-like symptoms and aches in the joints - but severe illness is rare.

What does subacute lupus erythematosus look like?

Typically subacute lupus erythematosus affects areas exposed to sunlight, such as the face, the V of the neck, the arms and the upper back. It shows itself as a red and sometimes scaly rash.

How will subacute lupus erythematosus be diagnosed?

Your doctor may be able to make a firm diagnosis after a clinical examination but in most cases it is necessary to take a small sample of skin (a biopsy) and to have this examined under the microscope in order to confirm the diagnosis. Your doctor will probably take a blood test too, as specific antibodies (known as "ENA" or "Ro and La") appear to be important in the condition.

Can subacute lupus erythematosus be cured?

There is no "instant cure" for subacute lupus erythematosus, but many treatments are able to help it.

How can subacute lupus erythematosus be treated?

Sun avoidance is essential. Corticosteroid ointments are particularly useful and it is often necessary to use a potent topical corticosteroid even on your face under medical supervision. Other treatments used by dermatologists and reported to be helpful include tacrolimus and pimecrolimus ointments, which can be used in conjunction with topical corticosteroids.

Sometimes medicines are also needed by mouth if ointments and sunscreens do not work, or if your general health is affected. The most commonly used are hydroxychloroquine and mepacrine - both of which are drugs originally devised to treat malaria. A few patients may require more powerful drugs such as methotrexate or oral corticosteroids.

(See the separate British Association of Dermatologists Patient Information Leaflets on this website for further information on hydroxychloroquine, mepacrine, oral corticosteroids and methotrexate.)

What can I do?

The most important thing you can do is to protect your skin from sunlight. This doesn't just mean avoiding sunbathing, but you should also reduce your exposure to the sun when you are out gardening, walking or shopping, playing sports, or even driving your car. Remember that the sun is most intense at mid-day, and can be quite powerful even on a hazy day. Lying under a sunshade does not protect you totally, and sun can be reflected from water and snow.

Sunscreens are useful but there is no such thing as a "total sunblock". The protection factor given on the packet applies when the sunscreen is applied carefully under laboratory conditions, and measures the protection it gives against short-wave ultraviolet light (also known as UVB). Use a sunscreen with a protection factor of at least 20, that also blocks out long-wave ultraviolet

light (UVA), denoted by asterisks (**). If you are out in the sun, repeat the applications of sunscreen regularly, not forgetting your ears, lips (specific lip blocks are available) and the back of your neck, particularly after swimming or if you are perspiring excessively. Sunscreen technology is improving all the time – your dermatologist or specialist nurse will be able to give you up-to-date information on this.

Clothing, including hats, can protect against sunlight, but beware! If you hold an article of clothing up to the light, and it lets any through, then it will let sunlight through as well. A light tee shirt or blouse may not be enough. Fortunately there is a growing range of clothes which feel (and look) cool in hot weather but block out the sun. Some even have “sun protection factor” numbers.

Laminated car windscreens block out UV, but side windows usually don't. UV-protective plastic film can be obtained to stick on to windows in your car and house.

Finally, if you become pregnant, your baby may be born with a rash or a slow heartbeat as the ENA antibodies are able to cross the placenta. For this reason it is important to let your obstetrician or midwife know that you have subacute LE.

Where can I get more information?

- The patient self-help group Lupus UK supports people with all forms of lupus; it has local branches around the country and arranges regular meetings, as well as supporting research into the condition. For further information contact:

LUPUS UK, St James House, Eastern Rd, Romford, Essex RM1 3NH
Tel. (01708) 731251, Fax (01708) 731252, Web: www.lupusuk.com

- More information about all types of cutaneous lupus erythematosus can be found at: www.dermnetnz.org/immune/cutaneous-lupus.html

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