

Did you Know April is Lupus Alert Month?

By Christopher Cussat

Do you even know what lupus is? Lupus is something that you have probably heard of, but like many diseases, unless you or someone close to you has it, you may not know exactly what it is.

According to the Lupus Foundation of Pennsylvania, lupus is a “chronic, inflammatory disease in which the body’s immune system fails to serve its normal protective functions and instead forms antibodies that attack healthy tissues and organs.” In other words, think of it as your body being allergic to itself.



Barbara Hastings is a nurse who serves as the Patient Services Director of the Lupus Foundation of Pennsylvania. The Wexford resident explained that someone diagnosed with lupus has an “overactive or ‘revved up’ immune system.” Basically, instead of acting as a “body protector,”

your immune system attacks your own body. This inspired the Foundation’s new campaign slogan, “The body’s battle against itself.”

Lupus can attack any part of the body; but it usually affects the joints, skin, kidneys and brain. For most people, it is a

mild disease affecting only a few organs, but it can sometimes cause serious and even life-threatening problems.

Definitely not an uncommon disease, it has been estimated that 1.4 to 2 million people (1 out of 185 Americans) have been diagnosed, making lupus more common than leukemia, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy and cystic fibrosis combined. Although lupus can occur at any age and in anyone, it appears 10 times more frequently in women, especially during childbearing years (ages 15-45).

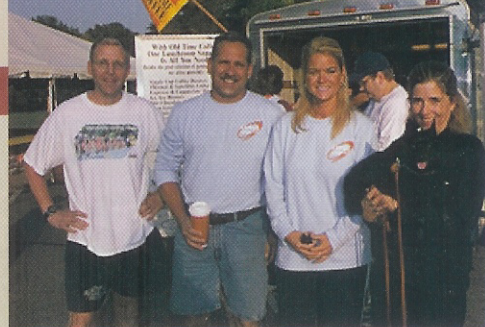
Despite its relative prevalence, most people do not understand lupus and sometimes confuse it with cancer or think it’s contagious or often fatal. The fact that the immune system is not easily visualized may fuel these misunderstandings. Said Hastings, “It’s a difficult concept to grasp because you can’t picture the immune system and it’s basically everywhere – in your blood, bones and within every cell of your body.”

But this is exactly why the Lupus Foundation exists: to educate about lupus and who it affects. They also promote awareness through advertising campaigns, fundraisers and special events. The Foundation continues to fund research for new treatments with the constant hope that a cure will be discovered.

In addition to directly servicing people who think they might have lupus or those who are diagnosed, the Foundation also organizes support groups which offer education from professional facilitators and more importantly, reassurance. Hastings concluded, “The opportunity to talk to others who have lived with lupus for twenty years is reassuring because it tells them they’re going to be ok and that they can manage this.”

Although there is currently no cure for lupus, early diagnosis and proper medical treatment can significantly help control the disease. It is organizations like the Lupus Foundation of Pennsylvania that not only provide valuable information, but more so, continue to offer help and hope for those afflicted.

The Lupus Foundation will be hosting their annual Education Program at the Sheraton Station Square Hotel on April 22. Premier lupus expert and researcher, Daniel Wallace of UCLA, will be the key speaker. The North Hills support group meets at UPMC Passavant every month. Please call 412-367-5200 for details. For more information about upcoming events, please call 412-261-5886, 800-800-5776 or visit www.lupuspa.org. ❖



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You must have four or more of these symptoms in order to be diagnosed with lupus:

1. Rash over the cheeks
2. Discoid rash (red raised patches)
3. Photosensitivity
4. Ulcers in the nose or mouth
5. Arthritis
6. Pleuritis or pericarditis (heart/lung inflammation)
7. Kidney disorder
8. Neurologic disorder
9. Hematologic disorder
10. Antinuclear antibody
11. Immunologic disorder