SLE (Lupus)

Systemic lupus erythematosus: symptoms and support

SLE (Lupus)

A guide to treatment, activity and self-management



Understanding lupus

Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), commonly called lupus, is a long-term autoimmune condition. The immune system becomes overactive and attacks healthy tissues. It can affect skin, joints, kidneys, lungs, heart, blood cells and the nervous system.

Supporting your wellbeing

Symptoms vary and can change over time. Treatment and monitoring can control symptoms and reduce flares. Many people with SLE live full, active lives.

Understanding your condition

Symptoms, causes, assessment and practical information

Symptoms can come and go

General: fatigue, fever, weight loss and feeling unwell.
Skin: butterfly-shaped cheek rash, sun sensitivity, red or scaly patches, mouth or nose ulcers.
Joints and muscles: pain, stiffness, swelling in hands or feet and muscle aches.
Kidneys: leg or eye-area swelling, foamy urine or high blood pressure.
Blood: anaemia, low white blood cells or platelets, increased clot risk.
Other: chest pain from heart or lung lining inflammation, headaches, seizures or hair thinning.

What causes SLE?

The exact cause is unknown. Genetics, hormones (SLE is more common in women), infections, sunlight, certain medicines and stress may contribute.

How is it diagnosed?

Your team may use history and examination; blood tests including ANA, anti-dsDNA, ESR/CRP and kidney function; urine tests for kidney involvement; and imaging such as ultrasound or chest X-ray. Diagnosis may take time because symptoms vary and can mimic other conditions.

Monitoring matters

Symptoms may flare and settle. Ongoing monitoring and occasional treatment changes may be needed. Report new symptoms early and attend regular medical check-ups.

Key message

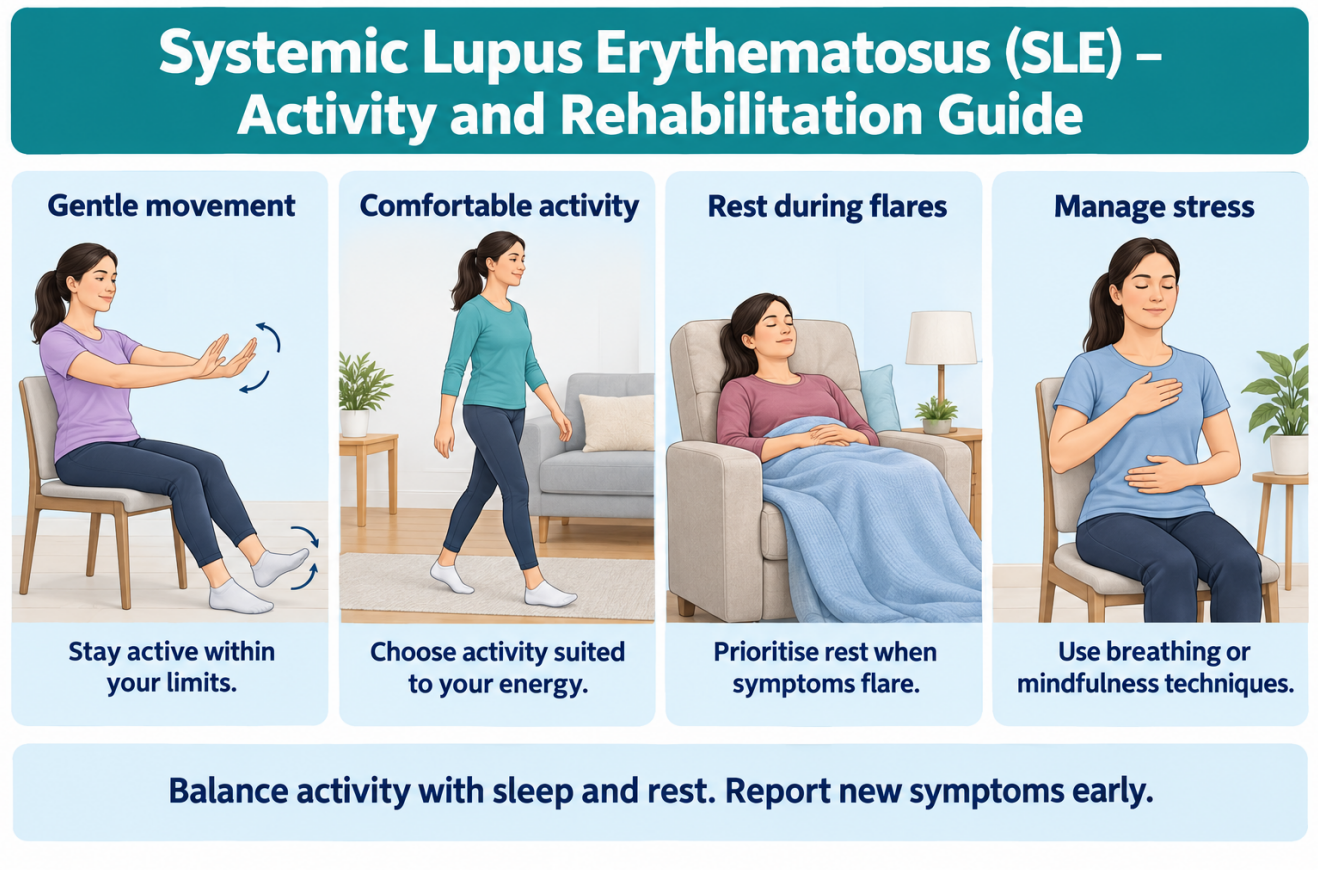
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Activity and rehabilitation

Suitable movement and pacing under professional guidance

Activity examples

Stay physically active within your limits and balance activity with sleep and rest. Choose activity suited to your energy and seek professional advice.



Activity guidance

Activity: comfortable movement within your limits.
During flares: rest, take medicines regularly and report new symptoms early.
Sun protection: avoid excessive sun exposure and use factor 50+ protection.
Stress: breathing or mindfulness techniques may help.

Exercise safely

Prioritise sleep and rest, and adjust activity during flare-ups. Seek urgent care for severe chest pain, breathing difficulty, seizures or other urgent symptoms listed on page 4.

Management and next steps

Treatment, self-care and when to seek help

Treatment options

There is no cure, but treatment controls symptoms and reduces flares. Options include NSAIDs such as ibuprofen, hydroxychloroquine, short-term steroids, immunosuppressants (azathioprine, methotrexate or mycophenolate), biologics such as belimumab, and blood pressure or kidney-protection medicines. Treatment depends on affected organs.

Self-management

- Maintain a healthy, balanced diet
- Stay active within your limits and prioritise sleep and rest
- Stop smoking and manage stress
- Attend regular medical check-ups
- Check vaccinations with your doctor

When should I seek urgent help?

- Severe chest pain or breathing difficulty
- Sudden swelling of legs or face
- Blood in urine
- Severe headache, confusion or seizures
- High fever that does not improve

Contact your healthcare provider or seek urgent care.

Living well and finding support

Early treatment and good self-care can reduce complications. Ongoing monitoring helps many people live full, active lives. Support: NHS - Lupus; local rheumatology services; Lupus UK.

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