Famous People With Lupus You May Not Know About

by ANNA SCANLON

Famous People With Lupus Throughout History

According to the St. Thomas Trust, one of the biggest and best hospitals for lupus in the world, lupus has been described in the annals of history since the ancient times.

Hippocrates, an ancient Greek doctor born in 460BC, was one of the first to write about symptoms of lupus and identified the malar rash. St. Martin, in the 10th century, was the first person to use the word lupus. As lupus is Latin for wolf, the malar rash was thought to resemble what occurred after being bitten by the animal.

Before modern medicine, the term "lupus" was used rather loosely and was meant to describe anyone with ulceration or lesions on the face or lower limbs. Knowing what we know about the differences in hygiene from then to now, it is safe to say that this would have been much more common than actual instances of lupus SLE.

During the Middle Ages, it was also thought that people with lupus (i.e. skin lesions on their faces or bodies) were actually werewolves and could transform themselves into animals.

Lupus research didn’t really begin until the 19th century; however, there are a few people throughout history that doctors and historians suspect may have had lupus. There are likely many more people who have had lupus, but it has slipped under the radar due to the difficulty in diagnosing the condition.

If lupus is difficult to diagnose now, imagine attempting to diagnose it before the majority of modern medicine!

Ludwig van Beethoven

Some historians believe that famed composer Ludwig van Beethoven was a lupus sufferer, in addition to suffering from hearing loss that may or may not have been related to SLE. Beethoven wrote to his brothers in 1802:

“For the last six years I have been afflicted with an incurable complaint, made worse by incompetent doctors. From year to year my hopes of being cured have gradually been shattered ... I must live like an outcast; if I appear in company, I am overcome by a burning anxiety, a fear that I am running the risk of letting people notice my condition. ... How humiliated I have felt if somebody standing beside me heard the sound of a flute in the distance and I heard nothing. ... I have such a sensitive body that any sudden change can plunge me from the best spirits into the worst of humors.”

Edward Larkin, a medical historian, wrote about Beethoven’s health in 1970 in his book *Beethoven’s Medical History* with the following passage:

“Beethoven may well have had the specific form of immunopathic disease known as Systemic Lupus Erythematosus, which typically commences in early adult life with a fever accompanied by mental confusion. Typical symptoms are destructive rash ('lupus') and redness ('erythema') of the butterfly area of the face. Any of

the immunopathic disorders may occur, notably colitis. The excellent life-mask of 1812 shows an elongated atrophic scar particularly suggestive of Lupus. The portraits clearly show flushing of the cheekbones and nose. Beethoven's high color was frequently commented on and may have aroused suspicions of heavy drinking."

Next page: more famous people with lupus throughout history.

Louisa May Alcott

Another historical figure thought to have had lupus was Louisa May Alcott, best known for her American classic novel *Little Women.* Alcott died suddenly of a stroke at age 55, but not before suffering greatly with a mysterious illness.

She believed it was due to mercury poisoning from medication she received for typhoid fever, but modern medicine has attributed many of her symptoms to SLE. She kept a diary of her symptoms for several years and a few portraits show her cheeks as flushed in the typical malar rash. This is most pronounced in the portrait that is hung at Orchard House in Concord, Massachusetts, her childhood home and setting for *Little Women.*

Ian Greaves, a medical historian, wrote of Alcott: "Her illnesses evoked intense interest in her time and in ours. Alcott tracked her signs and symptoms (in letters and journal entries), which included headaches and vertigo, rheumatism, musculo-skeletal pain, and skin rashes; in her final years she recorded severe dyspepsia with symptoms of obstruction, and headaches compatible with severe hypertension."

More of Alcott's words about her "mysterious illness" can be read in the book *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott.* More information about Alcott's condition and the retrospective diagnosis can be read in the essay, *"*Louisa May Alcott: Her Mysterious Illness" in the volume *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine – Volume 50, Number 2, Spring 2007, pp. 243-259* from Johns Hopkins University.

Flannery O'Connor

Flannery O'Connor was famous for her Southern Gothic style of writing and two novels *Wise Blood* and The *Violent Bear It Away.* In 1937, her father was diagnosed with SLE and subsequently passed away in 1941 when O'Connor was just 15.

This left her devastated, but she still pressed forward and ended up graduating from college in an accelerated program. In 1951, at the age of 25, she was diagnosed with SLE. In those days, the life expectancy for someone with diagnosed lupus was only five years, however O'Connor outlived her prognosis and remained alive for another 14 years.

While suffering with lupus, O'Connor pumped out most of her work, including two novels and her books of short stories (*A Good Man is Hard to Find* and *Everything That Rises Must Converge).* Several of her works were published posthumously, including *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose, The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor, The Presence of Grace: and Other Book Reviews, Flannery O'Connor: Collected Work* and *A Prayer Journal.*

O'Connor moved back to the farm she grew up on in Milledgeville, Georgia following her diagnosis and raised birds; her main love apart from her literary ventures. She died in 1964 at the young age of 39 from complications of lupus (though the exact complications are not specified).

Others

Other famous people from decades past who had lupus SLE include Georgeanna Tillman of the Marvelettes (Motown's first successful girl-group), Donald Byrne (a chess player who represented the US with his skill in the 1950s and 1960s), Teddi King (jazz vocalist), Hugh Gaitskell (a British politician, former Head of the Labour Party) and Michael Wayne, John Wayne's oldest son.

Also a lupus sufferer: Lucy Vodden, Julian Lennon’s childhood playmate and the inspiration for the famous Beatles tune, *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.*

While lupus can definitely slow you down, it is important to not lose hope. Incredible feats can be accomplished while living with this illness and it is important to look to those who have achieved their dreams whilst living with SLE.

St. Thomas’ Hospital in London houses a website that allows readers to view stories and biographies of famous people who have lupus or have been touched by the illness, the St. Thomas Lupus' Trust.