Managing the Risk of Lupus and Blood Clots

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The Relationship Between Lupus and Blood Clots

Living with lupus SLE means living with an increased risk of blood clots. This is particularly true in lupus patients who test positive for the lupus anticoagulant, which can promote platelets to stick together, or reduce vitamin C in the bloodstream, which keeps the blood from sticking together.

Clotting problems, oddly enough, seem to occur more often with younger lupus patients than in the older population. Most of the time when clots happen, they are relegated to the vein — usually in the legs and associated with deep vein thrombosis (DVT).

Sometimes, however, clots can appear in the arteries, and when this happens the most common place for them to occur is in the brain, which can lead to a stroke.

There is also a higher risk of blood clotting when you are pregnant (for any woman regardless of if she has an autoimmune disorder), adding another dimension to an already risky lupus patient's pregnancy. If you are pregnant with lupus, work with your doctor to ensure that you are being accurately monitored for any clots that may occur.

As with anything else with lupus, prevention and vigilance are both key elements to keeping yourself as healthy as possible.

Choose Birth Control Carefully

Firstly, if you are sexually active and trying not to get pregnant, it is important that you are aware of the risks involved in a lupus patient taking hormonal birth control. Hormonal birth control can up your risk for blood clots significantly, especially if you smoke as well. Death from birth control pills isn't as uncommon as people may think, so speak with your doctor or gynecologist at length before deciding on a contraceptive to use.

Other options for lupus patients can include a coil (though some immunosuppressants can decrease its effectiveness, so be aware of this before having it inserted), non-hormonal pills, the implant or a shot. Speak with your doctor before deciding to have any of this done and talk to him or her candidly about your lupus and any medication you are taking. This will help the pair of you decide on something that will work for you.

If you don't want to put anything into your body, there is always the option of having your partner wear a condom.

Quit Smoking

Smoking also raises the risk of blood clots — in everyone, not just lupies. In general, as you probably know, smoking really isn't good for your health so if you do smoke, speak with your doctor about ways you can cut down and eventually quit. Your body will most definitely thank you!

Maintain a Healthy Weight

Being overweight or obese can also contribute to blood clots, so it is extremely important that you maintain a healthy weight if you suffer from lupus. This can be difficult, as lupus may lead to periods of inactivity and medication like steroids can make you even hungrier. This is a typically a recipe (no pun intended) for some serious weight gain.

However, speak to you doctor about any concerns you may have when it comes to your weight or weight gain. He or she may be able to put you in touch with dietician who will help you lose weight or stay at a healthy weight through controlled food portions and a little bit of exercise when you can tolerate it.

Be Vigilant During Periods of Inactivity

On the same note, prolonged flares can also cause a blood clot because of the inactivity. This is especially true if you are in the hospital and are not getting up to use the toilet, as this can reduce blood flow resulting in a clot.

In the hospital, they are typically very vigilant about the risks of clots and may give you medication to cut down on the risk and/or compression stockings to help keep your blood flowing. This is especially the case after surgery, as this is when it is the most dangerous.

If you are experiencing a long period of inactivity due to a health problem or surgery, ensure that you drink a lot of water and take any blood thinners that have been prescribed. Get up and go to the toilet and walk around as much as possible, even if it is only for a few minutes a day. This will help decrease your risk and keep you healthy.

Know the Symptoms

As a lupus patient, you should be very aware of the signs and symptoms of a blood clot. For some people, there may be no symptoms, so in that case there is little you can do except do your best to prevent one.

However, for others there are clear-cut symptoms that mean you should either alert your doctor (if you are in the hospital) or go to the emergency room as soon as possible.

If you have a blood clot, you may notice swelling, pain or cramping in the area where the clot is located. It may feel heavy and your skin may feel hot to the touch. If the clot is in your leg, the pain may feel worse when flattening out your foot.

If you have a blood clot in your lung, also known as a pulmonary embolism, you may feel breathless and have deep chest pain that may become worse when you breathe in.

If you have lupus and experience any of these symptoms, it is important that you are treated right away, as it is possibly a life-threatening emergency. Many people do survive blood clots, but it is important that you are well aware of the risks beforehand and work to prevent them before they even form. This is the best way to ensure you will live a long, healthy life with lupus.