Lupus Complications and Comorbidities

by KRYSTINA OSTERMEYER

Coping With Lupus Complications and Comorbidities

As if having an autoimmune disease isn't enough, often lupus occurs with other conditions, called *comorbidities.* According to *Merriam-Webster*, a comorbidity can be defined as "existing simultaneously with and usually independent of another medical condition." Whether one condition causes the other or if it is purely coincidental remains to be seen but the following disease states often occur in conjunction with lupus.

Sjogren's Syndrome

Sjogren's Syndrome occurs in 10 percent of lupus sufferers. This syndrome is an autoimmune disease that causes the glands that produce tears and saliva to not work properly, causing people to have dryness in the mouth and eyes and even in the vagina.

Dryness occurs because the immune system begins "to attack the moisture-producing glands of the eyes and mouth (the lacrimal and parotid glands, respectively), resulting in decreased tears and saliva." It is often diagnosed by using the Schirmer's test, which uses a piece of litmus paper under the eyelid.

Treatment of Sjogren's is largely symptom related. Medications may be prescribed to treat dry eyes or dry mouth or to increase tear and saliva production.

Depression

It is estimated that one-third of people suffering from lupus also suffer from depression and anxiety. Clinical depression is much more than a passing depressing thought – it is feelings of helplessness and hopelessness and a loss of interest in daily life.

Depression associated with lupus is not a direct cause of lupus, but rather the drain of coping with the disease on a daily basis. It may also be caused as a side effect of medication necessary for treatment of lupus, such as steroids.

It is important to speak with your provider if you have symptoms of depression as it can be treated.

Autoimmune Thyroid Disorders

It is estimated that six percent of people with lupus have hypothyroidism – an underactive thyroid gland – and one percent have hyperthyroidism – an overactive thyroid gland. In general, people with autoimmune diseases have a greater risk of developing thyroid disorders.

The thyroid gland is located in the neck and aids the body in metabolism. If the thyroid is not working properly, it can affect the general functioning of a variety of organs, such as the brain, heart, skin and, kidneys. An over- or

under-functioning thyroid can cause major weight fluctuations, heart palpitations, and emotional disturbances, amongst other symptoms.

Treatment for autoimmune thyroid disorders involves regulating the thyroid gland – eventually returning the metabolism to a normal state.

Cardiovascular Disease

In a Swedish study completed in 2010, 20 percent of 208 participants with lupus died at an average age of 60. Cardiovascular disease accounted for more than half of the deaths – 52 percent. According to researchers, it isn't this statistic that is alarming, it is the fact that "cardiovascular death in the SLE cohort occurred predominantly in women at a substantially younger age than is common in women without SLE."

In another Swedish cross-sectional study with 597 patients with lupus, 11 percent had ischemic heart disease, 10 percent had ischemic cerebrovascular disease, while 16 percent had a history of venous thromboembolism (blood clots).

Further research indicates that smokers with lupus had a further increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

The Bottom Line…

If you have lupus, being diagnosed with another health condition may be inevitable. Eating healthy, getting exercise, sleeping an adequate amount, and reducing stress can all help you live the best life you can – and *possibly* fend off some of the comorbidities.