

**lupus**  **FACT SHEET**

Lupus Canada

## Balancing Act: Lupus, Activity and Rest

**A**ctivity and rest. The yin and yang of good health, especially if you have systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE or lupus). On the one hand, regular exercise helps prevent joint stiffness, promotes a healthy weight and reduces stress. On the other hand, rest can also reduce stress, relieve inflammation of joints, restore energy, and help you deal with the fatigue that is so often the hallmark of lupus. Unfortunately, fatigue may prevent you from being physically active, while the lack of physical activity may make you feel even more fatigued! The key is to find a balance that works for you.

### Health in motion

The benefits of physical activity are well known and worth repeating. When you exercise on a regular basis, you:

- Improve your circulation and lung capacity;
- Make it easier to reach and maintain a healthy weight;
- Help prevent health problems that may be associated with lupus, including type 2 diabetes, heart attacks, strokes and osteoporosis;
- Increase your muscle strength;
- Strengthen your muscles and prevent your joints from getting stiff;
- Reduce fatigue and stress; and,
- Improve your quality of life, overall health and sense of well-being.

With all these benefits to be gained, it's not surprising that exercise is strongly encouraged for people with lupus, especially during flare-free periods.

“Regular physical activity” doesn't mean running marathons or intense sessions at the gym, however. In fact, starting slow and exercising moderately are key. Remember: overdoing it can be as bad as not doing anything at all.

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Your goal should be to work towards a total of 60 minutes of physical activity a day. Sound daunting? It needn't be, especially if you tackle those 60 minutes of activity in 10- to 20-minute increments. Remember, every little bit counts.

### Getting started

For many of us, the toughest part of exercising is taking that first step. Here are some tips to get you motivated and keep you moving:

- First things first: check with your doctor before starting any type of exercise program. Together, you can work out the type and amount of activity that's right for you.
- Buddy up. Pairing up with a friend will help get you going on days when your motivation is low.
- Set concrete goals (for example: “walk to work three times this week”) and chart your progress. Post an activity chart on your fridge so that you can see how much you've accomplished. Give yourself a reward, such as a new workout top or walking shoes, as you reach each goal.
- Do something you like. You are more likely to stick with an activity if it's fun. Find out what activities your local community centre offers and try something new.
- Mix it up. Incorporate a variety of activities into your life so that you can pick one according to your energy level. Variety also prevents boredom.
- Schedule it. Lack of time is a barrier to regular physical activity for many people. Allot time for exercise, just as you



## A FEW WORDS OF CAUTION

Always check with your doctor before beginning a new exercise routine. Some people may also benefit from consulting a physiotherapist.

If you are going to be active outside, be sure to wear sunscreen, as exposure to sun can cause a lupus flare.

Listen to your body. Reduce your activity level if you notice unusual or persistent fatigue, weakness, joint swelling or pain after exercising.

It may be wise to limit strenuous exercise during a lupus flare. **This is a time when rest is important.**



## DON'T SWEAT IT

If the idea of exercising conjures images of endless jumping jacks at the gym, think again. Being physically active is not just about running, jumping or sweating. “No-sweat” exercise such as yoga, tai chi, aquatics and walking offer countless benefits for the body, mind and soul. Such gentle exercises release endorphins without the stress hormones you get from high-intensity activities. The result is a more meditative effect, helping you reduce your overall stress – something that’s great for your lupus management. Note, however, that they may not have some of the cardiovascular benefits of more aerobic exercise.

would any other appointment.

**Yoga:** There are many different styles of yoga, so look for one that is gentle and slow-paced, such as Hatha (whose name suggests “balance”

in Sanskrit) and Naram (which means “gentle”). By moving the body into specific shapes, yoga helps increase circulation, which, in turn, nourishes the joints. The meditative aspects of yoga are very calming, helping to reduce stress.

**Tai chi:** This slow and gentle form of exercise encompasses a series of positions strung together into continuous movement. It helps improve strength, balance and flexibility, and can be adapted for people of different abilities, including those using a wheelchair.

**Aquatics:** Water-based exercises (usually done in the deep end of a pool using flotation belts) are not only gentle, they enable you to do things you might not be able to do on dry land. Since water is much denser than air, aquatic exercises provide muscle training with less stress on your joints. Plus it’s fun!

**Walking:** Walking is something you do every day anyway – you just need to do a little more. Invest in good walking shoes and buy a step counter or pedometer. These instruments keep track of every step you take and help keep you motivated by

making it easy to set targets. Try adding 3,000 steps to your daily total and gradually build up to 10,000 steps each day.

## Take a break

As beneficial as physical activity is, rest is equally important. Fatigue is one of the most common symptoms of lupus. By paying attention to your body, you will learn to recognize fatigue before it becomes overwhelming. Don’t ignore these signs, as exhaustion may put you at increased risk for a debilitating lupus flare.

Just as you need to schedule time to exercise, you should set aside time for rest. You may need to arrange one or two rest periods each day. Rest doesn’t necessarily mean napping, although many people with lupus who experience sleep disturbances may benefit from a brief snooze during the day (just don’t nap too long, as this can actually increase insomnia).

Planning ahead and pacing yourself will help prevent overexertion and give you the rest periods you need. Look at what you need to do each day or week, set priorities and focus on the most important items while you have your highest energy levels. Build in flexibility so that you can postpone less important items if you become fatigued. If possible, set aside one day a week that doesn’t involve any errands or chores.

Don’t overwhelm yourself with large projects. Divide activities into several smaller tasks. For example, instead of

spending an entire morning housecleaning, spend 15 minutes dusting on Monday, 15 minutes cleaning the bathroom on Tuesday, etc.

Recognize that stress carries a physical and emotional toll. Try different strategies to help you deal with stress, such as support groups, professional counselling or meditation. Include a relaxing, enjoyable activity every day. Reward yourself with a scented bubble bath or set aside time to read a great book. Don't feel guilty about your need for rest. Recognize that it is an important part of your lupus management.

insurance (for yourself and your travel companions) so that you won't lose your money if you have to cancel or come home early due to a flare. Review your insurance options carefully before purchasing, since not all policies cover pre-existing conditions. Keep insurance documents separate from other identification to keep it from being lost or stolen, and leave a copy at home.

- Carefully research your trip so that you can match your destination with your capabilities. If you are particularly sun-sensitive, a trip to the tropics might not be the best option. If you fatigue easily, inquire about how much walking is involved in any excursions. If you have a mobility restriction, use a travel agent with expertise in travelling with a disability, and be sure to inquire about wheelchair or scooter access at hotels and tourist attractions you plan to visit.
- Consider a cruise. You can visit multiple destinations and enjoy a wide variety of activities without exhausting transfers. Plus, you unpack only once.
- Pack appropriately. Take lots of sunscreen and sun-protective clothing when travelling south. If Raynaud's phenomenon bothers you, bring appropriate clothing.
- Travel with a doctor's note stating that you have lupus and what medications you take. This note is crucial if a prescription refill or medication adjustment is needed while you're away, and it can help you avoid problems at airports. Make sure the note includes each drug's generic and brand names (brand names may differ in other countries, including the United States). In addition, some medications are illegal in other countries, so the doctor's note is particularly important. If necessary, have the letter translated before you leave. Keep a copy in your wallet and another in your luggage.
- Keep medications in their original containers with prescription labels attached.
- If you inject any medication, check with the airline regarding its policy on syringes in carry-on luggage. Each airline has different rules and regulations.
- If you need to take your medication with water and you're



## TRAVEL WITHOUT TROUBLE

Travel can be fun and exciting – but also exhausting. If you have lupus, there is no reason you can't enjoy travelling the world, as long as you plan ahead. Here are some tips that will help ensure a happy, healthy trip:

- Start with a visit to your doctor to discuss your trip in relation to your lupus. Ask what you should consider in terms of avoiding a flare and what immunizations you might require.
- If you are travelling outside Canada or the United States, you might want to consult with a travel health clinic to discuss your immunization needs. Schedule your appointment at least six to eight weeks before your trip, as vaccines can take several weeks to become effective.
- Ask your doctor for a referral to a doctor or health clinic at your destination in case you need medical assistance while away. Alternatively, check with the International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers to find a doctor who speaks English. You may also want to check the Internet for information about any local lupus associations.
- Be sure to get health insurance in case you need medical attention while you are away. Consider trip cancellation

unsure about the safety of the water in the country you're visiting, carry bottled water.

- Err on the side of caution when packing your medical supplies. For example, carry a supply of your medications in both your carry-on bag and stowed luggage, in case your luggage is lost.
- Fatigue and dehydration are common when travelling, so rest often and keep tabs on your fluid intake.
- Traveller's diarrhea is common. Ask the travel clinic or your doctor whether you should bring over-the-counter medication to treat this.
- Before you leave, visit Health Canada's website at [www.travelhealth.gc.ca](http://www.travelhealth.gc.ca). It lists travel clinics, health advisories and more helpful information.
- Wear a MedicAlert bracelet. It is recognized around the world and could save your life in a situation in which you cannot speak for yourself.



#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Lupus Canada: [www.lupuscanada.org](http://www.lupuscanada.org). This site includes electronic versions of the *Living Well with Lupus* fact sheets.
- *Lupus: The Disease with a Thousand Faces*, edited by Dr. Sasha Bernatsky and Dr. Jean-Luc Senécal, Key Porter Books (2004) ISBN 1-55263-603-8. Contact Lupus Canada to order this book.
- *Canada's Physical Activity Guide to Healthy Active Living*: [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/pau-uap/paguide/](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/pau-uap/paguide/)
- Public Health Agency of Canada (for health advisories, a list of travel clinics and a list of immunizations required for travel outside Canada): [www.travelhealth.gc.ca](http://www.travelhealth.gc.ca)
- International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers (IAMAT): [www.iamat.org](http://www.iamat.org)

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#### Disclaimer

*Systemic lupus erythematosus is an autoimmune disease that affects thousands of Canadians, mostly women in their childbearing years. Symptoms vary greatly from person to person and treatment is highly individualized. Patients are urged to contact their physician or healthcare professional with any questions or concerns they might have.*

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