

LUPUS

and Healthy Eating



Lupus and Healthy Eating

Will what I eat make a difference to my lupus?

Yes, there are some foods which you should avoid and others which may help to keep you healthier, but there is no simple answer which will cure your lupus symptoms.

If you have lupus nephritis it is important that you follow advice from your hospital dietician.

Food content and calories

Each food contains a mixture of nutrients, the main or macro nutrients are protein, carbohydrate and fat (which are all given a calorific value), the smaller or micro nutrients are vitamins and minerals. Each food contains a number of these things, but is usually referred to by the name of the macro nutrient which forms the largest proportion, so for instance rice and potatoes are called carbohydrates because the largest content is starch; fish, meat, beans and peas are called proteins. Fat contains double the quantity of calories that protein or carbohydrates have.

Foods which should help you

When you have lupus it is important to look after your whole body: the information contained below is beneficial for anyone to follow, so is also suitable for family and friends.

All of your meals should include carbohydrate, some protein and some fat.

You need carbohydrate in order to give you energy. Good sources of carbohydrate are rice, potatoes, pasta and bread. It is better to use brown rice and pasta and wholemeal or bread containing grains: these will not only give you longer lasting levels of energy, but the grains will be a valuable source of many of the B vitamins and fibre. Carbohydrate sources and vegetables should take up about 2/3rds of your dinner plate.



Meat, fish, eggs, peas and beans are all sources of protein. This should represent about 25% of your dinner plate. Red meat will help build muscle and is a particularly good source of iron, white meat is a good

source of protein; fish like herring, mackerel and salmon are the best sources because they also contain fish oil: if you are pregnant you are advised not to have more than two fish meals a week because of the possibility of mercury levels being high. The main roles for protein are to repair and replace tissue, build muscles, and provide enzymes which speed up reactions in the body.

If you are a vegetarian you need to take extra care with your diet to ensure a biologically 'complete protein' intake. This is because various food groups of vegetable origin have an imbalance of two essential amino acids, lysine or methionine. This has led to the idea that foods from the different groups be combined for meals, such as cereals and legumes. In practice this means that meals that combine for example beans and rice or houmous and bread will provide a biologically 'complete' protein intake.* The iron which you absorb from plant sources is called non-haem iron and needs more processing than the haem iron from animal sources, so you will need to consume more.



Fat sources are milk, cheese and other dairy products. You will benefit from using low-fat/semi-skimmed versions of these foods as they will cut down on blockages in the arteries and reduce the number of calories you eat. Some commercial low fat foods can contain extra sugar to give the smoother texture we enjoy from fat: do check labels to see how much sugar has been included in the product. Fats are used by the body for producing some hormones, processing fat-soluble vitamins (which includes vitamin D), providing a suitable membrane for the body's cells and by the brain, nervous system and skin.

Fibre (found particularly in oats, vegetables, seeds and grains) binds to bad cholesterol to protect you from coronary artery disease and speeds up the passage of food through the gut. So it is really important to include plenty of fibrous foods in your diet.

Foods which will not help you

The main food to avoid is alfalfa sprouts: this has been shown to worsen lupus symptoms. Alfalfa is used as cattle feed in many countries and the sprouting shoots of this are sold in some health food stores, but are not included in most packaged salads. Check the label before you buy anything like this to make sure.

Other foods which are best avoided are

- saturated and 'trans' fats,
- too much sugar,
- too much salt
- foods which are highly processed.

These foods are not helpful for anyone. Most of them contribute to raising the risk of coronary heart disease: there can be an increased risk of this in people with lupus, so you will protect yourself by reducing the amount of all of these. The recommended daily amount of salt should not be more than six grams, which is approximately one teaspoonful: many processed foods are highly salted which means that it's really easy to exceed this amount. Don't season your food with salt, use lemon juice or herbs to enhance its flavour.

*Source – Vegetarian Society factsheet 'Protein' www.vegsoc.org

Saturated and 'trans' fats are solid at room temperature and will clog up your arteries. Your body does need some fats to produce some hormones and process the fat-soluble vitamins and for the brain and nervous system to function, so you do need to include the unsaturated fat, particularly omega fatty acids in your diet. Don't eat too many crisps, cakes and snacks which have high levels of the wrong types of fat.

Extra weight can also make you at risk of developing diabetes and put more pressure on your joints. Your waist measurement is a good indicator of whether you are at risk of diabetes or coronary heart disease: men should have a waist measuring below 94cm (37 inches) (if you are a man from South Asia do not allow your waist to be above 90cm 36 inches) women of all races should not exceed 80cm (32 inches).

When you have lupus your energy is often very low: it is tempting to look for food/drinks which may appear to help. Some foods can give you a quick buzz of energy, like biscuits, cakes and fizzy drinks, but this will not last and you will feel exhausted more quickly than if you had eaten more healthy types of food containing less sugar and less refined carbohydrate.

A lot of pre-packaged food is processed: in order to give it a pleasant taste and texture and a long shelf-life it contains proportionately large amounts of salt, sugar and the wrong type of fat. When you are very tired the temptation is to buy something which just needs heating up, but be careful in choosing your product: the ingredients may be doing you more harm than good. Baked beans on toast, rice and peas, or peanut butter on wholemeal bread are meals which will give you some good basic nutrition without taking a lot of effort.



As lupus is an illness in which the immune system is disordered, it is wise to avoid things which will 'strengthen your immune system': some supplements promise this benefit, some energy drinks for instance have high levels of caffeine and can cause the heart to race. They could end up making your symptoms worse, so don't be tempted to use them.

Good foods to include in your diet

Fruit and vegetables should be a large part of your diet as they are good sources of vitamin C and many of the B vitamins as well as fibre: the advice is to include at least five portions a day, and you will definitely benefit from eating more than that number. Do not use fruits to the exclusion of vegetables: fruits contain a sugar (fructose) and too much of this can lead to other health problems such as diabetes. One portion of smaller fruits and vegetables (eg peas, sweetcorn, cauliflower) is around three tablespoons or a good handful. A good rule is to have half of your dinner plate filled with vegetables.

Vitamin C is really helpful for many functions of the body: it helps prevent and

fight infection, is useful for producing collagen, helps in processing iron, prevents damage by free radicals to membranes and proteins and helps in wound healing.

The B vitamins are really important for many people with arthritic conditions, and certain medications can interfere with metabolism of folate. Good sources are eggs, soya, poultry, fish, dairy products, many green leafy vegetables, peanuts and whole grains.



Many of the B vitamins prevent a number of diseases and help enzymes in their various functions. Vitamin C and the B vitamins are water soluble so if you take too much they will leave your body in your urine.

Calcium is very important in bone health: good sources of calcium are milk and milk products, vegetables such as cauliflower and broccoli, fortified soya and cashew nuts. Some foods have added calcium (eg bread).

Vitamin D is one of three hormones which regulate calcium levels in the body: vitamin D is manufactured in the skin by sunlight but sun protection makes it's absorption impossible. Because people with lupus need to protect themselves against UV light, there is a danger that they do not absorb sufficient sunlight to keep vitamin D levels adequate, as the sun is not strong enough between October and March in the UK. There are few dietary sources, but fish oils contain some vitamin D. Some foods such as margarine and breakfast cereals have small amounts added. No plant sources of vitamin D exist, so vegetarians need to be aware of this.

Talk with your consultant and GP about your vitamin D levels as you are probably prescribed calcium supplements which may contain vitamin D. It may be that by going out in the sunlight before 11 am without sun protection for about 15 minutes only, would give you access to sufficient sun to keep your vitamin D levels high enough.



The kidneys are involved in an important stage of converting vitamin D into its active form, so if you have kidney involvement you need to take medical advice from your nephrologist about getting adequate vitamin D.

It is really important to have sufficient iron in your diet, otherwise you are at risk of anaemia: your GP has probably already checked you for this, but do ask them if you aren't sure. If you are menstruating then you will regularly lose iron and it is crucial to replace this. As mentioned earlier, the easiest form of iron for your body to absorb is from animal sources.

If you are vegetarian you will need to consume larger amounts to compensate for your iron source being less efficiently absorbed. You may also find that iron, zinc and other metals that the body needs are not so easily absorbed, as the binding sites within the body can give priority to phytates from indigestible fibres in some vegetables and fibrous foods.

Vitamins and supplements

Vitamin tablets and supplements are not an alternative to eating healthily. It is always wise to talk with your GP about what supplements you wish to take as they can have a serious effect on some medications you may be on, such as Warfarin. They may suggest that you supplement your diet if they find that there is a deficiency. If you eat a good balance, particularly of fruit and vegetables, this should give you sufficient vitamins. It is relatively easy to overdose on the fat soluble vitamins and this can be dangerous to your health (particularly vitamin A) as well as wasting your money.

Many people have found it beneficial to take essential fatty acids, particularly if lupus affects their joints as these are thought to reduce inflammation. These can be found in various foods such as oily fish, walnuts, seeds, linseed and rape seed oil (good for cooking or dressings). Some foods (such as eggs) are 'enriched' with these fatty acids or you may wish to take a supplement to add to your intake from food. Your doctor can advise you on this.

Preparing food

Always wash your hands before you put anything into your mouth, but especially when preparing food.

The best way to cook your food is either to grill, steam or bake it in the oven. Stir frying is also a good way to quickly cook vegetables so that their vitamin C content is as high as possible: there are sprays which you can use to put a small amount of oil or fat in the pan to facilitate.

You may wish to cook extra food so that you can conserve your energy on another day. Keep the food in the fridge. Do ensure that this is thoroughly re-heated before you eat it, the centre of the meal should be hot as well as the outer edges, and the best rule is for it to simmer for 20 minutes, stirring frequently; if you are microwaving cut the portions into smaller pieces and again, check that the food is evenly heated.

Baking foods in the oven (or slow cooking) would give you an opportunity to rest after the preparation stage and then you can do any final detail after an hour or two's rest.

What diet is best?

The best diet to follow is one which contains a good balance of varied foods, and most importantly is one which you feel that you can stick to. There are many diets around, some are useful, others can be too extreme, or too complicated to follow when you have limited energy and particular needs. If you have lupus and are catering for a family too, you don't have the energy to prepare two different types of food all the time. Some diets can involve a lot of counting and planning, some incur a lot of expense.

Lupus affects us in many different ways, so there is not one diet which is guaranteed to work for everyone with lupus, but the Mediterranean diet (plenty

of fruit and vegetables, grains, nuts and seeds, two portions of fish per week and small amounts of meat and dairy produce) is probably the simplest one to follow and is suitable for all the family as it is a pattern of healthy eating. Research has shown that it is beneficial in a wide variety of chronic illness such as diabetes, breathing problems and heart disease.

The GI (glycaemic index) or GL (glycaemic load) diet is also helpful.

Some people find that excluding gluten from their diet gives them more energy. Don't be tempted to start excluding a lot of foods from your diet (as some therapists may suggest): this could lead to serious deficiencies which would not help you in the long run. If you feel that you have problems processing certain foods, talk to your GP and ask for a referral to either a dietician or an allergy specialist within the NHS. There are commercial allergy tests available, but these are not always accurate and can run away with your money but bring you no lasting benefit.

Weight problems

People with lupus often have issues with their weight, either the illness causes them to lose weight or they may increase their weight, sometimes due to inability to exercise or because of some medications. Food can also play an emotional part in our lives, particularly if our culture reflects food as central to family life: again, lupus patients will vary, some will stop eating when they are upset, others will 'comfort' eat foods particularly high in sugar. It is also easy to think that you don't eat very much, but by dipping into snacks whilst watching TV for example, or by not having meals at regular times, your disordered eating patterns will have a bad effect on your weight.



Some people with lupus are underweight and find it is really difficult to raise their weight. Talk to your GP about this and ask for a referral to see a hospital dietician.

Healthy lifestyle

Exercise is an important way to help keep you in good health and reduce your weight: talk to your GP about getting good advice on this – you may be able to get 'exercise on prescription'. As brisk a walk as possible three or four times a week will be really beneficial in many ways. There are some websites listed at the end of this leaflet, and details of a booklet on exercise published by Arthritis Care, which you may find helpful.

Alcohol

Alcohol may interact with some of your medication such as Warfarin and some taken for depression, blood pressure and sedation, so it is wise to talk with your doctor about this if you drink regularly. Alcohol is processed by the liver and takes priority over all other actions of the liver, including processing your medication. There is no food benefit in alcohol, but the sugar it contains will increase your calorie consumption, so it could contribute to weight gain and possibly lead to diabetes.

However alcohol in small measure (less than three small glasses a week) may be beneficial, but this is something to discuss with your consultant.

Oral health

It is sensible to clean your teeth twice a day, but do not do this immediately after eating otherwise the surface of your teeth will be damaged. Wait at least 40 minutes and preferably an hour after consuming anything before you brush them.



You may find that orange juice can cause mouth ulcers: you can either dilute this or change to apple juice so that you don't lose this valuable source of vitamin C.

Conclusion

There is no simple answer to your lupus, nor to losing or increasing weight, but you can improve your health by following a sensible eating plan, eating at regular times, and not using food as a compensation for other problems. All of this involves you making good decisions: you can ask for help from your GP, but in the end you control your own lifestyle. Do give yourself the best chance of living as healthily as possible – it's in your own interest!

Useful websites

British Heart Foundation **www.bhf.org.uk** has a lot of really useful information which is very relevant to people with chronic health problems too.

In addition you may wish to look at some of the following:

British Dietetic Association **www.bda.uk.com**

British Nutrition Foundation **www.nutrition.org.uk**

Diabetes UK **www.diabetes.org.uk**

Heart UK **www.heartuk.org.uk**

Walking for Health **www.walkingforhealth.org.uk**

Weight Concern **www.weightconcern.co.uk**

BHF National Centre for Physical Activity **www.bhfactive.org.uk**

Arthritis Care **www.arthritiscare.org.uk**

(Exercise booklet can be downloaded - <http://bit.ly/1NKe5vM>)

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