



# Lupus & the Digestive System

Lupus affects different people in different ways. Many people with lupus have problems with their digestive system.

## How Does Lupus Affect the Digestive System?

The digestive system includes the digestive tract (mouth, esophagus, stomach, intestines, and anus) — as well as the liver, pancreas, and gallbladder.

Some digestive problems are caused by lupus itself, some are side effects of lupus treatments, and some have other causes (like infections). It's a good idea to talk to your doctor if you have digestive problems to find out if they are related to lupus.

### Lupus and the mouth

Many people with lupus have **ulcers** (open sores) inside their mouths. Lupus can also cause inflammation of the gums. Regular dental visits are important because they can help you spot dental problems early on.

### Lupus and the esophagus

Lupus can cause inflammation in the esophagus and weaken the muscles you use to swallow. This can lead to problems like **acid reflux** — when stomach acid moves backward from the stomach to the esophagus. Acid reflux that lasts for a long time is called **gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)**. Symptoms of acid reflux and GERD include gas, vomiting (throwing up), heartburn, and trouble swallowing.

### Lupus and the stomach

Many people with lupus have peptic ulcers (open sores in the stomach lining). Symptoms include:

- **Stomach pain**
- **Nausea** (feeling like you're going to throw up)
- **Vomiting**

Peptic ulcers are often side effects of medicines used to treat lupus, like nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and steroids.

### What's inflammation?

Inflammation usually happens when your immune system is fighting an infection or an injury. But lupus makes your immune system attack healthy tissue instead, and that can cause inflammation in lots of different body parts, including parts of the digestive system.

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## Take Steps to Help Protect Your Digestive System

While many digestive problems need medical treatment, making lifestyle changes may prevent or ease some symptoms.

### Try these steps:

- ✔ Eat a healthy diet and be physically active
- ✔ Drink plenty of water, especially when you're swallowing pills
- ✔ Get enough sleep — and avoid eating right before bedtime
- ✔ If you smoke, make a plan to quit
- ✔ If you drink alcohol, drink only in moderation
- ✔ Take steps to manage your everyday stress
- ✔ Protect yourself from infections

Depending on which digestive problems you have, your doctor can suggest other changes to help you feel better.

**Keep in mind that any medicine you take for lupus can have side effects. Talk with your doctors about what changes to watch for with the medicines you're taking. And tell your treatment team right away if you have any side effects.**

### Lupus and the intestines

Lupus can cause **vasculitis** (inflammation of the blood vessels) in the intestines, sometimes called lupus enteritis. Symptoms include:

- **Abdominal pain** (pain in the belly area)
- **Feeling very full or bloated**
- **Diarrhea** (watery poop)
- **Nausea and vomiting**
- **Loss of appetite**

Some people with lupus have other problems with their intestines, like **irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)**. Symptoms may include abdominal pain, gas, diarrhea, and constipation (having trouble pooping).

### Lupus and the pancreas

Lupus can cause **pancreatitis**, or inflammation of the pancreas. Some lupus medicines can also cause pancreatitis. Symptoms include pain in your abdomen (belly area) that can spread to your back, nausea, vomiting, and fever.

### Lupus and the liver

Lupus and some lupus medicines can cause **hepatitis**, or inflammation of the liver. Most people with hepatitis don't notice any symptoms, but symptoms can include:

- **Fatigue** (feeling tired)
- **Jaundice** (yellow skin and eyes)
- **Nausea and vomiting**
- **Abdominal pain**
- **Dark urine** (pee)
- **Pale or gray stool** (poop)

### Lupus and the abdomen

Lupus can also cause other problems in the abdomen, including:

- **Peritonitis** (inflammation of the abdominal lining)
- **Ascites** (a build-up of fluids in the abdomen)

Symptoms of peritonitis and ascites include abdominal pain and swelling, nausea, vomiting, and fever.

## Find the right treatment plan

Because lupus can cause a lot of different digestive problems, there are many different medicines that can treat them. A special doctor called a gastroenterologist can work with your rheumatologist to find a treatment plan that works for you.

If you have symptoms of digestive problems, tell your doctors **right away**. It's important to treat these problems early, before they cause serious damage to the digestive organs.

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on Lupus** ■

by **Lupus Foundation of America**

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**National Resource Center on Lupus** at:

**Lupus.org/Resources**