

The Treatment of Lupus with Naturopathic Medicine

By Sara Korsunsky BSc., N.D.

Naturopathic Medicine is a beneficial and effective means of treatment of Systemic and other forms of Lupus, and is unique in its individualized and patient centered approach. Naturopathic Doctors (ND's) are highly trained primary care providers who can offer their patients supportive treatments to help manage symptoms, but more importantly, to establish health and wellness naturally.

As both a Naturopathic doctor and a patient with SLE, I have learned first hand of the advantages of using Naturopathic medicine alongside conventional treatment to manage my health and reach a state of balance. I was diagnosed with SLE at the age of sixteen, and being a teenager, it was a difficult to make changes in my life to accommodate Lupus. Following my diagnosis, I saw a rheumatologist and was prescribed Plaquenil and short courses of Prednisone or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory agents (NSAIDs) to control my flares, which then consisted mostly of rashes and severe polyarthritis. I also experienced daily stomach pain, swollen lymph nodes (lymphadenopathy), headaches, and various other symptoms that were all attributed to my SLE and did not resolve with my medications. When I asked my rheumatologist about Naturopathic Medicine, she shrugged and told me that due to her lack of knowledge about it I was on my own. With the support of my family, I embarked on a journey of healing that was so inspiring, I have made it my career and my goal to help people take responsibility for their health and wellness and to not be passive participants. My Lupus flares have become very mild and sporadic due to the changes that I have learned about from Naturopathic Medicine and the therapies that I have used, which have included nutritional changes, botanical medicines, acupuncture and homeopathic remedies and lifestyle counseling. For many years now, my SLE has been managed with only Plaquenil, and low doses of Imuran, which I have been able to decrease over time, and a long list of my "Lupus" symptoms have disappeared and not returned. I anticipate that as I learn more and am more able to live my life in a way that honours Lupus, my health will only improve, and I am excited now to be able to treat others with chronic illness and help them on their journey to wellness. (As of 2011 I am taking only Plaquenil at a half of the recommended dosage, and have successfully carried my first child to full term, and nursed him healthily. I have not had any major symptoms in over 5 years).

What is Naturopathic Medicine?

Naturopathic Medicine uses a combination of science and medical art to diagnose and treat patients using proven natural therapies. There is a great focus on patient care, disease prevention and the patient's participation in decisions and treatment. Due to frustration with the limitations of conventional, allopathic medicine and a desire for more holistic and preventative therapies, Naturopathic Medicine has experienced a resurgence of popularity in the past 10-20 years in North America. Naturopathic Medicine excels at patient care- visits are often a half hour to one and a half hours long, and at treating both acute and chronic illness. ND's respect the important role that conventional medical doctors play in providing emergency care and pharmaceutical prescriptions, and are accustomed to communicating with MD's about their patients' care. ND's are trained in scientific diagnostics, pathology and traditional pharmaceuticals and are able to communicate with conventional doctors. It often offers its patients less invasive alternatives to conventional allopathic, medical treatments such as drugs and surgery, and also offers a holistic approach to achieving wellness. Naturopathic Medicine's strength lies in the application of its 6 founding principles:

- 1) *Do no harm*- Naturopathic doctors use gentle, non-invasive techniques with minimal side effects to treat restore health, opting not to suppress symptoms, but rather to support the body's healing processes
- 2) *Identify and treat the cause of disease*- rather than simply suppress symptoms, ND's try to find and remove the underlying physical, emotional, and spiritual causes of disease and distress
- 3) *Treat the whole person*- Naturopathic Medicine recognizes the connectivity of body, mind and spirit, as well as the relationships between our body's many systems, and incorporates these into each patient's individualized treatment plan
- 4) *Support the healing power of nature*- the inherent healing power of nature and of the body is honored and every effort is made to facilitate this
- 5) *Emphasize prevention*- Naturopathic doctors emphasize the prevention of disease by assessing risk factors, heredity and susceptibility to disease and making appropriate interventions in partnership with their patients to prevent illness.
- 6) *Doctor as teacher*- Naturopathic doctors encourage patients to take responsibility for their health through education about their bodies, wellness and treatments.

Naturopathic Doctors are trained in pre-medical basic sciences at accredited universities and then must complete a four year, rigorous training program that includes scientific diagnostics, physical examinations and laboratory test interpretation. ND's learn treatment modalities which include Acupuncture and Asian medicine, Homeopathy, Botanical medicine, nutritional analysis and counseling including vitamin and mineral therapies, stress and lifestyle counseling, spinal and body manipulation, and hydrotherapy. Many patients who seek ND's are female, and ND's are trained extensively in women's health and obstetrics as well. **It is important to note that Naturopathic therapies are powerful natural prescriptions that may interact with pharmaceutical prescriptions and if taken incorrectly, may lead to side effects. These treatments should not be taken without consultation of a trained Naturopathic Doctor who is licensed and registered with his or her respective provincial/state board of ND's and the Canadian /American Association of Naturopathic Doctors.**

The Naturopathic Approach to Treating SLE

Lupus is an inflammatory auto-immune disease of connective tissue (which forms the skin, joints and muscles) and where the immune system is overactive. It is treated conventionally by suppressing various components of the immune system. This treatment is often necessary to get the disease process under control so that the patient can function well.

The treatment of SLE with Naturopathic medicine involves evaluation of the whole body and how it is affected by inflammation. The use of acupuncture, which acts on the body's energy meridians to strengthen weaknesses and resolve imbalances, is proven to help decrease Lupus symptoms and flares, and perception of illness. Homeopathy is a very powerful form of medicine that is gentle, deep acting and effective, and also corrects imbalances through the use of minute doses of medicines. Both acupuncture and homeopathy address the whole body and stimulate natural healing. I strongly recommend lifestyle and stress counseling not only for Lupus management, but for the stress that everyone experiences from day to day life! This involves evaluating how stress, including the stress of living with a chronic illness, affects a person, and how it can be better managed.

Natural therapies for SLE include methods of immunomodulation, which involves stimulation of underactive components and inhibition of overactive components of the

immune system. Examples of treatments that achieve this are plant sterols, which are often used to treat allergies and asthma, and adrenal gland support. As most patients can agree, Lupus activity is strongly associated with higher levels of stress. Since the adrenal glands make hormones for stress adaptation such as cortisol, Naturopathic medicine supports the function of these important glands to minimize the impact of stress and maximize the body's coping mechanisms. Herbs such as Licorice have anti-inflammatory and cortisol-like effects, and can be extremely helpful in supporting the adrenal glands after their function has been suppressed with prednisone and corticosteroids.

Naturopathic Medicine also addresses the acute symptoms of Lupus with natural anti-inflammatory and immune supportive agents such as hydrotherapy techniques, digestive enzymes and omega 3 fatty acids found in oils and foods, just to name a few. In conjunction with systemic treatments, herbal creams and ointments are great alternatives to steroid creams for rashes and help to heal tissue rather than suppress the inflammation.

Other noteworthy and essential treatments for Lupus patients include supporting the liver in its efforts to metabolize drugs, preventing damage and repairing the gut wall when NSAIDs are used, and the management of side effects of various medications used for Lupus. ND's perform in depth nutritional analyses and counseling to identify and eliminate food allergens and sensitivities that tax the immune system and cause it to overreact on a daily basis, and to advise patients on harmful and helpful foods. Celiac disease and wheat sensitivity occurs frequently in Lupus patients, and its symptoms can be corrected through dietary changes, but this disease is not always identified by MDs.

There are many other effective Naturopathic treatments available to help with issues such as arthritis, fibromyalgia, and systemic symptoms of SLE in the kidneys and neurological system, but they are beyond the scope of this article. Naturopathic doctors are trained to explore the totality of symptoms in any disease. They can offer supportive advice and treatments for concurrent diseases and health problems such as weak immune systems, depression, menstrual irregularities, insomnia, and fertility concerns.

As you might have guessed, the treatment possibilities for Lupus are numerous. This myriad of options allows for patients to help direct their treatment and try several therapies until they are feeling comfortable. I enjoy being a part of my healthcare as a patient because I know that I am doing everything that I can to keep my body healthy and prevent the progression of my disease and the development of other diseases, and that feels really good. Most importantly I have learned an incredible amount about myself and my Lupus, and my attitude towards it has changed drastically. I used to feel that Lupus was like a weight, holding me back from accomplishing things in my life. Now I see that it is a reminder that I often do not take the time to breathe, to sit, to relax, and to renew. I look at Lupus as an opportunity for me to grow, and now to share both my experience and my knowledge as a doctor with others who are struggling.

Sara Korsunsky BSc, N.D. is a Naturopathic Doctor with a family practice at the Centre for Natural Medicine in Winnipeg. She offers consultations with patients with Lupus to discuss natural medicine options and her own experiences with restoring her health. She is licensed by the Manitoba Association of Naturopathic Doctors and is a member in good standing of the Canadian Association of Naturopathic Doctors. Please visit her clinic website at www.naturalmedicine.mb.ca for more information. You can reach by e-mail at info@naturalmedicine.ca or by phone at 204-488-6528.