

Lupus attacks in high numbers

Disease affects more people than AIDS and other diseases

By T. LaSHAUN McCARTER
This Week

It began as a leisurely trip for two to South Dakota in 1987. It ended with Pat Strong developing symptoms of a potentially fatal disease.

"The fatigue was just awful," Strong said. "We had gone on vacation and on our way back, the back of my knees swelled."

Strong, 62, was diagnosed with lupus in 1989, two years after that



P. Strong

trip and many months of enduring extreme fatigue and swelling of her knees and hands.

Lupus is a chronic, autoimmune disease that causes inflammation

of various parts of the body. According to the Lupus Foundation of America, it affects one out of every 185 Americans, but very few people know about the disease, which causes the immune system to attack normal tissue. Lupus deserves attention

because more people have the disease than AIDS, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, sickle cell anemia and cystic fibrosis combined,



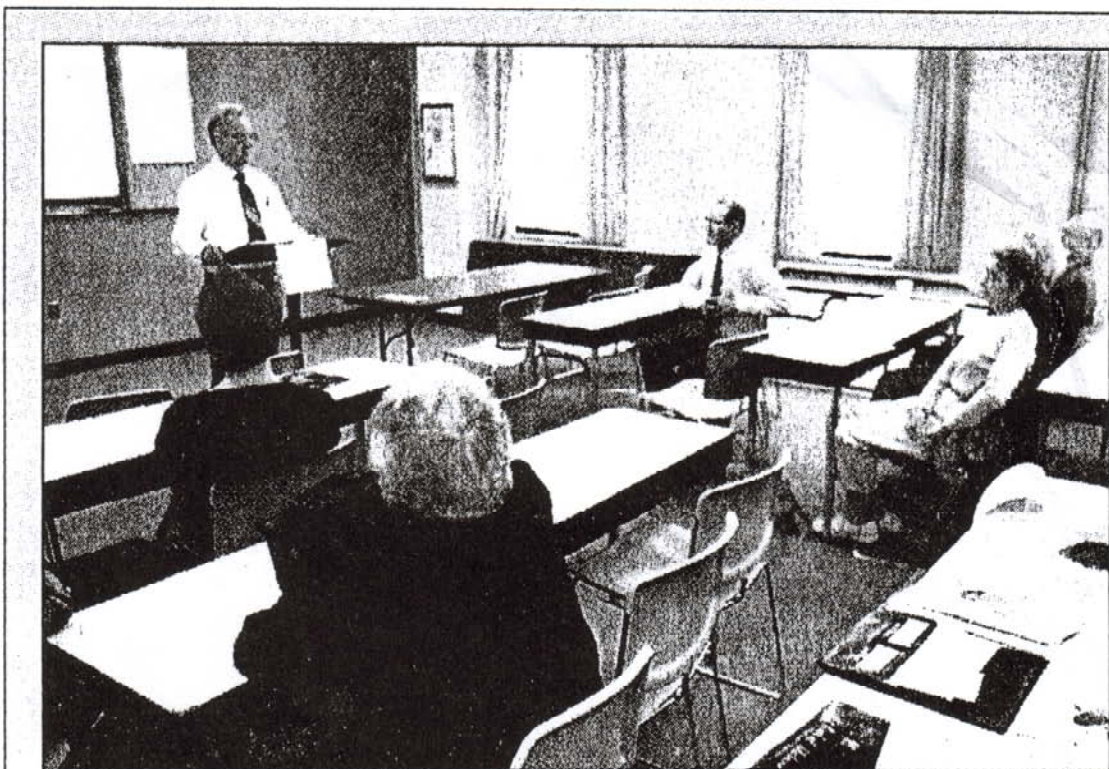
D. Strong

according to the Lupus foundation.

Strong's was initially diagnosed to have rheumatoid arthritis after visiting several doctors, but her symptoms continued.

Robert Goodman, a rheumatologist and member of the Lupus Foundation's medical advisory board, said lupus is harder to diagnose because the symptoms mimic other illnesses. Currently, there is no single laboratory test that can determine whether a person has lupus or not.

"It's like a detective who has to solve a crime using circumstantial evidence, or someone trying to put together a



The Times/DARREL ELLIS

Donald Strong, whose wife was diagnosed with lupus, is now the president of the Shreveport Chapter of the Lupus Foundation of America. The organization meets every third Sunday of the month at Highland Hospital. Every other month, the organization has a featured guest. For more information, contact Donald Strong at 686-2528.



Looking for symptoms

Lupus symptoms mimic other illnesses, so it can be difficult to diagnose. Diagnosis is usually made after a careful review of a person's entire medical history coupled with an analysis of specialized test results. Listed below are 11 symptoms and signs that help distinguish lupus from other diseases. A person should have four or more of these signs to suspect lupus. They do not all have to occur at the same time.

- **Malar rash:** rash over the cheeks.
- **Discoid rash:** red, raised patches.
- **Photosensitivity:** reaction to sunlight, resulting in the development of or increase in skin rash.
- **Oral ulcers:** ulcers in the nose or mouth, usually painless.
- **Arthritis:** nonerosive arthritis involving two or more peripheral joints.
- **Serositis:** pleuritis or pericarditis.
- **Renal disorder:** excessive protein in the urine and/or cellular casts.
- **Neurologic disorder:** seizures and/or psychosis in the absence of drugs or metabolic disturbances which are known to cause such effects.
- **Immunologic disorder:** positive LE (lupus erythematosus) prep test, positive anti-DNA test, positive Sm test or false positive syphilis test.
- **Antinuclear antibody:** positive test for antinuclear antibodies in the absence of drugs known to induce it.
- **Hematologic disorder:** hemolytic anemia, leukopenia, lymphopenia or thrombocytopenia; the leukopenia and lymphopenia must be detected on two or more occasions and the thrombocytopenia must be detected in the absence of drugs known to induce it.

Other symptoms include

- Achy joints (arthralgia)
- Prolonged or extreme fatigue
- Butterfly-shaped rash across the cheeks and nose
- Hair loss
- Raynaud's phenomenon (fingers turning white and/or blue in the cold)

Source: Lupus Foundation of America, Inc.

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puzzle," said Goodman, who treats about 50 lupus patients. "We have to take all the things and add them up before we can find out if it's lupus."

For Strong's husband, Donald, the possibility of her having lupus was an eye-opener. "I opened a book about diseases

and the first thing I saw was, 'Lupus is a fatal disease.' But after a while, I realized that old age is a fatal disease, too, and I dealt with it." The couple had only been married three months at the time; they are now working on their 10th anniversary.

"In the beginning (when lupus was discovered), they said people had a five-year life expectancy. Now it is considered controllable," said Donald.

Normally, the body's immune system attacks foreign invaders,

Couple finds strength from Lupus group

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bacteria and viruses. In an autoimmune disorder such as lupus, the immune system loses its ability to tell the difference between foreign substances and its own cells and tissues. The disease usually affects the skin, joints, blood and kidneys, causing inflammation. A telltale sign of lupus is a butterfly-shaped rash across the cheeks of the face and bridge of the nose.

Strong controls her symptoms with the use of medication and limiting her exposure to sunlight.

Age is not a determining factor in the disease, but race is. Lupus is more prevalent in African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and Asians. For example, for every one Caucasian female with the disease, there are 10 African-American females.

Tanya Cooper, 22, an African-American, was diagnosed seven years ago.

"One morning I woke up and my eye was hurting and it looked like I had the pinkeye," Cooper said. "The doctor said I had iritis, (inflammation of the eye's iris) and I was being treated with steroids, but then my kidneys started acting up."

Doctors performed a biopsy on her kidneys, and Cooper was found to have lupus. She still experiences discomfort from her kidneys, and getting out of bed on some mornings is a no-no.

Pat Strong understands.

"Your energy is just zapped," she said.

Neither Strong nor Cooper are able to work because of the disease. Strong worked for a carpeting firm before her diagnosis but was forced to retire when she couldn't lift the paperwork from filing cabinets.

Micheline Hearth-Holmes, assistant professor of medicine in LSUMC's Rheumatology Department, said having lupus at such a young age is hard on people like Cooper.

"The younger ones do seem to struggle more," said Hearth-Holmes, who has been researching lupus for seven years. "We try to provide a lot of educational materials and teach them everything because they want to know why they are like this and what the disease is."

Donald said lupus is one of the least known of the major diseases but nationally-known British singer Seal has brought some

awareness to the disease. Seal suffered from lupus as a youngster and still bears its aftermath with scars across his cheeks.

"People really don't know about it," Donald Strong said. "But I think as the word gets out, we are going to find a lot more people we know have lupus."

To help them learn more about the disease, the Strong's joined the Lupus Foundation of America Shreveport Chapter immediately after Strong was diagnosed. The chapter has been in existence since 1980.

Donald Strong is now president of the support group that covers eight Northwest Louisiana parishes, 11 counties in northeast Texas, nine counties in southwest Arkansas and two counties in southeast Oklahoma.

"It really helps to get into a support group," Strong said. "When we call each other and talk among ourselves, it helps everybody."

Donald Strong said, "The worst thing people can do is stick their head in the sand."

The Shreveport chapter meets every third Sunday of the month at Highland Hospital. Every other month, the organization has a featured guest.