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## Stem-cell transplant promising to fight lupus, study says

By Lindsey Tanner  
The Associated Press

CHICAGO — For all of her 20s, when Edjuana Ross should have been relishing the thrill of early adulthood, she was instead in and out of hospitals, battling a disease that attacked her skin, brain and heart.



Edjuana Ross underwent a stem-cell transplant.

Now, at 33, she has her life back, thanks to a stem-cell transplant from her own bone marrow, a drastic, experimental treatment that could be promising for patients with severe lupus.

Ross' illness is in remission for the first time since her diagnosis shortly after high-school graduation.

"I'm just trying to get used to being well, and it's a very weird feeling," Ross said.

The Park Forest, Ill., woman is among 48 patients with severe lupus who had the treatment at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. Thirty-three patients have had no disease symptoms since their transplants, some for more than seven years, said Northwestern's Dr. Richard Burt, who led the study.

Six patients died from causes unrelated to the treatment.

The probability of disease-free survival for five years was 50 percent, encouraging for those who failed more conventional treatment for the most severe form of lupus, a disease in which the body's immune system attacks its own organs and tissues.

"It turned out very well, showing that we could do this safely," Burt said.

The study appears in today's Journal of the American Medical Association. It expands on short-term results with fewer patients the same researchers reported in 2000.

The definitive test will be a randomized study that will compare results for transplant patients with those given standard lupus treatment.

About 1.5 million people nationwide have lupus, 90 percent of them women. Most are diagnosed during early adulthood.

Classic symptoms include rashes, joint pain and fatigue. Some patients have only mild cases, but many develop debilitating disease that randomly attacks vital organs. For about 5 percent, lupus is life-threatening and doesn't respond to conventional treatment.

Ross was one of these patients. Her symptoms persisted despite massive doses of the steroid prednisone. They included scarring rashes, joint pain

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and extreme fatigue

Prednisone can have severe side effects, including weight gain, thinning bones and tooth damage.

A JAMA editorial says the results "do not necessarily represent 'cure,'" and it warns that many patients likely will have late relapses. But as a last-resort treatment, "the therapy offered substantial benefit," according to the editorial by Drs. Michelle Petri and Robert Brodski of Johns Hopkins University.

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