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▼ Lupus treatment promising

CHICAGO (AP) — Six months ago, Heather Markel was dangerously ill with lupus, an incurable disease that had attacked her lungs and kidneys and forced her to rely on steroids for strength.

Now doctors who destroyed Markel's immune system and then revived it say lupus may be vulnerable to a new procedure called a stem cell transplant.

Markel, a 24-year-old medical student from Millersburg, Ohio, shows no signs of lupus in her system two months after the treatment, said Dr. Richard Burt at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. She is the first patient to undergo the procedure.

Burt and others cautioned that it is still early for a definitive answer since the disease is characterized by active and inactive periods.

"We're just going to have to continue to follow her," Burt said. "But

at least we have a short-term remission with no evidence of disease."

Lupus turns a victim's immune system against their body. The worst cases attack the joints, tissues and organs. Symptoms range from arthritis, skin lesions and fatigue to heart attacks, strokes and kidney failure.

Many die from complications.

The new process takes stem cells, which grow into bone marrow cells, a foundation of the immune system, from a patient's blood and purifies them. Intense chemotherapy destroys the patient's immune system and then the purified cells are returned to blossom and recreate the immune system.

Destroying the immune system does expose patients to other dangers, so for now only the most severely afflicted lupus patients — about 1 percent — should receive the treatment, Burt said.