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New treatment seems effective against lupus

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CHICAGO — Lupus, an incurable disease that turns victims' immune systems against them, has proved vulnerable to a new radical approach that destroys and then revives the body's natural defenses, doctors said Friday.

A 24-year-old woman dangerously ill with the disease

shows no signs of lupus in her system two months after the treatment, said Dr. Richard Burt at Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

Heather Markel, whose condition worsened recently after 13 years of treatment with steroids and chemotherapy, is the first patient to receive the treatment, Burt said.

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

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 re-create the immune system.

But destroying the immune system exposes patients to other dangers, so for now only the most severely afflicted lupus patients, or about 1 percent, should receive the treatment, Burt said.