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# New approach shows promise in fighting 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 last week.

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 of 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.

A medical student from Millersburg, Ohio, Markel contracted lupus when she was 11. The disease attacked her lungs, kidneys, blood and central nervous system, leaving her with failing kidneys and soaring blood pressure.

Since the stem cell transplant in April, Markel's kidneys have returned to normal, her strength is back and she has sharply lowered the amount of steroids she is taking.

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. "This is much more than you would expect from a normal remission."

Symptoms of lupus range from arthritis, skin lesions and fatigue to heart attacks, strokes and kidney failure. The worst cases attack the joints, tissues and organs; many patients 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 immune system and then the purified cells are returned to blossom and recreate the immune system.

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

"We are encouraged by any new treatments for lupus, but we are waiting for a much wider statistical sample," said John Huber, the Lupus Foundation's executive director.

The process is also being tried on people with multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis, and doctors hope it may someday be successful against all three diseases.