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Radical stem cell transplant shows promise in fight against lupus, doctors say

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Associated Press

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.

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 when she came to Northwestern in January.

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.

"I think about what it would be like to be normal, not to take medicines," said Markel. "I don't know really what it's like to not go into the hospital every time you get sick."

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."

The disease turns a victim's immune system against his or

her 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.

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.

The number of Americans with lupus is disputed. The Lupus Foundation of America Inc. estimates more than 1.4 million people have it, but government estimates put the number at less than half that.

"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 results are important, said Dr. John Klippel, clinical director of the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases in Bethesda, Md.

He was not involved in treating Markel. "One certainly looks forward to a continuation of these studies and the results in other patients."

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