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Doctors say process helped treat lupus

By Brian Bergstein

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CHICAGO — 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.

Markel contracted lupus when she was 11. The disease attacked her blood and central nervous system, leaving her with failing kidneys and soaring blood pressure when she came to Northwestern in January. Thirteen years of treatment with steroids and chemotherapy had apparently failed.

But since the 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," Markel said Friday. "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. "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.

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.

The procedure 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 dis-