Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS)

What is Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS)?

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), sometimes called Lou Gehrig's disease or classical motor neuron disease, is a rapidly progressive, neurological disease that affects the nerve cells *(neurons)* responsible for controlling muscles. Unable to function, the muscles gradually weaken, and twitch. Symptoms are usually first noticed in the arms and hands, legs, or swallowing muscles. Muscle weakness and atrophy occur on both sides of the body. The disease does not affect a person's ability to see, smell, and taste, hear, or recognize touch. Patients with ALS have less incidence of depression than in many other conditions. The disease does not usually impair a person's mind or personality. The cause of ALS is not known, and scientists do not yet know why ALS strikes some people and not others.

Is there any treatment?

No cure has yet been found for ALS. However, the drug riluzole--the only prescribed drug approved by the Food and Drug Administration to treat ALS--prolongs life by 2-3 months but does not relieve symptoms. Other treatments are designed to relieve symptoms and improve the quality of life for people with ALS. Many treatments and medicines are available to help individuals with many of the symptoms that patients with ALS may encounter. Physical therapy, occupational therapy, and rehabilitation may help to prevent joint immobility and slow muscle weakness and atrophy.

What to expect?

Regardless of the part of the body first affected by the disease, muscle weakness and atrophy spread to other parts of the body as the disease progresses. Individuals have increasing problems with moving, swallowing, and speaking or forming words. Eventually people with ALS will not be able to stand or walk, get in or out of bed on their own, or use their hands and arms. In later stages of the disease, individuals have difficulty breathing as the muscles of the respiratory system weaken. Although ventilation support can ease problems with breathing and prolong survival, it does not affect the progression of ALS and so most experts recommend against the use of ventilators in ALS. Patients survive an average of 3 to 5 years from the onset of symptoms. So it's critical to use your time wisely. About 10 percent of those individuals with ALS survive for 10 or more years.

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Synonym(s): Lou Gehrig's Disease

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