Symptoms of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis

Health & Medicine, Disease

Medical history has been filled with an array of diseases and illnesses, ranging from the common cold to deadly killers. Some are easily treatable and others can be terminal, but some of the worst are those that still remain without a cure; one such disease is amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS, is a degenerative disease affecting the human nervous system. It is a deadly disease that cripples and kills its victims due to a breakdown in the body's motor neurons. Motor neurons are nerve cells in the brainstem and spinal cord that control muscle contractions. In ALS, these neurons deteriorate to a point that all movement, including breathing, halts. Muscle weakness first develops in the muscles of body parts distant from the brain, such as the hands, and subsequently spreads through other muscle groups closer to the brain. Such early symptoms as this, however, can hardly be noticed.

Early symptoms of ALS are very slight and often overlooked. They begin as simple things, such as tripping or dropping things. Twitching or cramping of muscles and abnormal fatigue of the arms and legs may soon follow, causing difficulty in daily activities, such as walking or dressing. In more advanced stages, however, shortness of breath or difficulty in breathing and swallowing ensue, until the body is completely taken over by the disease. Intellect, eye motion, bladder function, and sensation are the only abilities spared.

Where and how this deadly disease originated is unknown, but it was first identified in 1869, by the noted French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. ALS is not contagious, but research is still vague on the cause of the disease.

Today, there are three recognized forms of ALS: genetic, sporadic, and Guamanian.

The genetic form of ALS appears to be inherited or passed down within afamily, and about ten percent of ALS patients have a family history of the disease. An abnormal gene has been located in about half these families, but the cause of the remaining half is still unknown. The next, most common form, is sporadic ALS. These patients have no family history of disease, and the cause of their coming down with ALS is a mystery. Finally, is Guamanian ALS, called this because a high percentage of cases occur in the Pacific Islands near Guam.

One major reason ALS is such a frightening disease is because no cure has been established. Although no effective treatment has been developed, a number of drug trials have been conducted, and there are some devices designed to help ALS patients maintain independence as well as safety as the disease progresses. These devices include ankle or foot braces, cervical collars, and reclining chairs. Since there is no cure, however, the primary treatment is for management of symptoms.

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis is also a difficult disease to diagnose, primarily because no one test can definitely establish if the disease is present. A diagnosis includes most, if not all, of the following procedures: electrodiagnostic tests, blood and urinary study, thyroid and parathyroid hormone levels, spinal tap and imaging, and muscular or nerve biopsy.

Most who develop ALS are between the ages of forty and seventy years of age, although cases have been reported of victims in their twenties and thirties. It was once thought to be a rare disease, but studies have shown that about 5, 000 people in the United States are newly-diagnosed with ALS each year--about 13 new cases a day! It isn estimated that about 100, 000 people who are apparently well in the country today will die with ALS.

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis is also popularly known as Lou Gehrig disease. Lou Gehrig was a famous baseball player in the 1930's for the New York Yankees. Once known as baseball's " Ironman", Lou Gehrig was truly a sports legend. His promisingcareercame to a screeching halt, however, when he was diagnosed with ALS. The disease not only took away his career in baseball, but his life; Lou Gehrig died at the young age of thirty-eight.

In conclusion, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis is a deadly and frightening disease; its victims cannot be saved. Someday, hopefully, a cure will be developed, and the suffering this disease is causing will be stopped.