AMYOTROPHIC LATERAL SCLEROSIS
SOCIETY OF MANITOBA
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ALS FACTS

Fact Sheet

ALS Destroys Motor Neurons

• The brain sends messages to the voluntary muscles through motor neurons.
• ALS does not affect the eye muscles, heart, bladder, bowel, or sexual muscles.

Types of ALS

• Sporadic ALS is the most common form of ALS.
• Familial ALS is inherited and is responsible for five to 10 per cent of cases.
• Bulbar ALS refers to cases where the muscles for speaking, swallowing or breathing are the first to be affected.

Early Signs

• Early symptoms can include tripping, dropping things, slurred or "thick" speech, muscle cramping, weakening and twitching.
• Early symptoms may seem vague and are often mistaken for normal signs of aging.

Signs of Lower Motor Neuron Degeneration

• Muscle weakness and atrophy.
• Involuntary twitching of muscle fibres.
• Muscle cramps.
• Weakened reflexes.
• Decreased muscle tone.
• Difficulty swallowing.
• Inability to articulate speech.
• Shortness of breath at rest.

Signs of Upper Motor Neuron Degeneration

• Muscle stiffness, or rigidity.
• Decreased ability to control laughing or crying.
• Increased or hyperactive reflexes.

Symptoms/Progression

• Symptoms and the order in which they occur vary from one person to another.
• The rate of muscle loss can vary significantly from person to person.
• As the disease progresses, muscles of the trunk of the body are affected and will likely involve the muscles required for breathing.

Diagnosis

• ALS can be difficult to diagnose in the early stages because symptoms may mimic other conditions.
• There is no ALS-specific diagnostic test except for some familial cases. Other diseases and conditions must be ruled out first.
• Specific gene mutations can be identified to test for some familial cases of ALS (i.e., SOD1 mutation).
• Doctors use physical examination, electromyography (EMG) test, blood tests, MRIs, and other tests to search for diseases similar to ALS.
• Many non-specialists are less familiar recognizing and treating ALS. Patients are often sent to an ALS specialist to confirm a diagnosis.
• People diagnosed with ALS should be fully informed about the disease, treatments, current research trials and available support services by the ALS Society in their province. A list of ALS societies is available at www.als.ca/_units.
• Find an ALS doctor in your province at www.als.ca/if_you_have_als/health_clinics.aspx.