Facts About ALS

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WHAT IS AMYOTROPHIC LATERAL SCLEROSIS?

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), more commonly referred to as Lou Gehrig's disease, is a neurodegenerative disease that attacks nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord. When these cells die, the ability of the brain to initiate and control all voluntary muscle movement is lost. Patients in the later stages of the disease are totally paralyzed, yet in most cases, their mental faculties remain unaffected.

The average life expectancy of a person with ALS is two to five years from time of diagnosis. But with recent advances in research and improved medical care, many patients are living longer, more productive lives. Half of all those affected live at least three years or more after diagnosis. About 20 percent live five years or more and up to 10 percent will survive more than 10 years.

HOW COMMON IS THIS DISEASE?

Every day, an average of 15 people are newly diagnosed with ALS — more than 5,600 people per year. As many as 30,000 Americans currently may be affected by ALS. Annually, ALS is responsible for two deaths per hundred thousand population.

ALS occurs throughout the world with no racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic boundaries. ALS can strike anyone.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF ALS?

The initial symptoms of ALS can be so slight, they may be overlooked. Early symptoms can include:

- Muscle weakness in the hands, arms, or legs; or in the muscles governing speech, swallowing, or breathing.
- Twitching and cramping of muscles, especially those in the hands and feet.
- Slurred speech and difficulty projecting the voice.

The symptoms of ALS and the rate at which it progresses can vary widely among different people. However, all individuals who suffer from ALS experience progressive muscle weakness and paralysis. Because ALS attacks only motor neurons, the senses of sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste are not affected.

HOW IS ALS TREATED?

At present, ALS treatment is aimed at relieving symptoms, preventing complications, and maintaining optimal function and quality of life for the patient. There is no known cure for ALS.

In 1995, the FDA approved the first treatment shown to alter the course of ALS. Studies suggest this antiglutamate drug can prolong the lives of those with ALS and slow the disease's progress.

For more information about ALS and the work of The ALS Association Massachusetts Chapter, please visit *www.als-ma.org* or contact Rick Arrowood, Executive Director, 781-326-8884.