

# What is ALS?



AMYOTROPHIC LATERAL SCLEROSIS  
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# ALS is clearly the most common of neurological death on an annual basis

- Dr. Michael Strong, research scientist at the Robarts Research Institute, London, Ontario



## WHAT IS ALS?

ALS, sometimes called Lou Gehrig's disease or motor neuron disease, is a rapidly progressive fatal neuromuscular disease. It is characterized by degeneration of a select group of nerve cells and pathways in the brain and spinal cord, which lead to progressive paralysis of the muscles.

## WHO GETS ALS?

ALS can strike anyone. ALS is not contagious, does not discriminate, and can strike at any age. ALS most often occurs between the ages of 40 and 70, but it can also occur in older and younger adults, and rarely in teenagers (Mitsumoto and Munsat, 2001). ALS is usually fatal within two to five years of diagnosis. There is a hereditary pattern in about 5 - 10 per cent of cases.

## WHAT ARE THE EARLY SYMPTOMS?

The symptoms and the area of the body first affected can vary from person to person. Typically ALS involves muscle weakness, fatigue, wasting, stiffness, loss of tone, cramping, twitching, and hyper- and hypo-reflexion. The onset of the disease may occur in nerves associated with muscles of the upper or lower

limbs, the throat, or the upper chest area. In rare cases, the muscles involved in breathing are first affected. These symptoms can result in decreased co-ordination in the hands, tripping and falling, weight loss, and difficulty swallowing, speaking, or breathing.

## WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF ALS?

Progressive paralysis of the voluntary muscles involved leads to loss of mobility, a decline in breathing function, difficulty eating and drinking by mouth, as well as speech problems such as slurring and low volume output. Not every person with ALS will experience all symptoms or have all areas of the body affected during their course of illness. ALS is usually, but not always, fatal within two to five years after diagnosis, however there are several options available to help manage the disease and preserve quality of life. Some cognitive abilities may also be affected, but ALS does not usually involve loss of sensory function - taste, touch, sight, smell and hearing.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT ALS?

Although recent scientific research has resulted in significant new knowledge, much more research is needed to find a cure. Research is being conducted in