# AMYOTROPHIC LATERAL SCLEROSIS (ALS)

Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) is a neurodegenerative disease that progresses over time and affects the nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord. As ALS advances, the brain loses its ability to control the muscles in the body.

This affects the muscles involved with voluntary movement (such as walking and mobility) as well as muscles utilized for respiration and swallowing. ALS generally occurs between 40 and 70 years of age, however, it can develop at any time.

ALS may be referred to as Lou Gehrig's Disease (after the famous baseball player afflicted with the condition) or motor neuron disease.

### What Causes ALS?

There are two types of ALS: sporadic (or random) and familial. Most people have the sporadic type — the cause of which is still unknown. A small percentage of people with the disease have familial ALS. They have a family history of the disease where dominant genetics are involved.

### Common Symptoms

Because the disease progresses slowly over time, symptoms can go unnoticed. They include:

- Arm or leg weakness
- Difficulty with speech or swallowing
- Muscle twitching and cramping
- Loss of muscle mass
- Shortness of breath

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## Diagnosing ALS

There is no specific test for ALS, and it is difficult to diagnose. It is essential to have a neurologist evaluate a patient by taking a thorough medical history and performing a neurological examination. Based on patient symptoms, this will enable the neurologist to rule in or rule out other diseases. Some tests that may be performed include: EMG (electromyography), which tests functionality of muscles and nerves, blood tests, urine screens, spinal tap and an MRI of the spine and brain.

## Treating and Controlling ALS

While there is currently no cure for ALS, there has been a surge of promising research. Focus is placed on managing the symptoms that accompany the disease in order to enhance quality of life, maintain activities of daily living and prevent other complications.

Riluzole is the only drug currently approved by the FDA for ALS. In some people, it slows the disease's progression. Other medications are often prescribed to alleviate some of the disease symptoms such as pain, depression, sleep disorders, gastrointestinal issues and fatigue. Nutritional support, mobility assistance devices and respiratory devices have shown to be helpful as the disease progresses.

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**For more information about ALS, visit the ALS Association at: alsa.org.**

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