

Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS)

Condition: Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) is also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

Background: In ALS, the nerves that control the muscles die, so the muscles get weak. About 1 or 2 out of every 100,000 people have ALS. ALS gets worse over time and there is no cure.

Risk Factors: Most people with ALS are between 65 and 74. About 10% of the time the disease runs in the family, but usually there is no known cause. More men than women have it. Other things that increase the risk of getting ALS are smoking and head injury.

History and Symptoms: Muscle weakness and shrinkage in the arms and legs are usually the first signs of ALS. Over a few years, the disease spreads to other parts of the body, making it hard to move, swallow, speak, and breathe.

Physical Exam: The doctor will test mobility, muscle strength and if the muscles are limp or stiff. The exam will also check if there are problems with speech, swallowing, or breathing.

Diagnostic Process: A test called electromyography is done to test the health of the muscles and nerves. MRI may be done to rule out other problems. Blood tests may help predict outcome.

Rehab Management: In the early stages, drugs and exercise can help with pain and muscle stiffness. Later on, other treatments may be needed to help with feeding and breathing problems, fatigue, and sleeplessness. Wheelchairs, lifts, computer-based communication tools, tube feedings and breathing machines may be needed. A physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) physician is the expert during all stages of this disease and can problem solve how to keep people with ALS as active and independent as possible. A PM&R physician uses rehabilitation therapies such as physical/occupational/speech therapy, braces, specialized equipment and medications to support patients with ALS.

Other Resources for Patients and Families: ALS is scary both for patients and families, so education and support are very important. Visiting nurses or companions can help out. A social worker can help families find the help they need, including planning for the loss of function and end of life.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is PM&R?

Physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R), also known as physiatry, is a primary medical specialty that aims to enhance and restore functional ability and improve quality of life to those with injuries, physical impairments or disabilities affecting the brain, spinal cord, nerves, bones, joints, ligaments, muscles and tendons. PM&R physicians, known as physiatrists, evaluate and treat the whole body, maximize patients' independence in their daily life and are experts in designing comprehensive, patient-centered treatment plans to empower patients to achieve their goals. By taking the whole body into account, they can accurately pin-point problems, decrease pain, assist in recovery from devastating injuries and maximize overall outcomes and performance with non-surgical and peri-surgical options. To learn more, visit www.aapmr.org/aboutpmr.

What makes PM&R physicians unique?

PM&R physicians' training focuses not just on treating medical conditions, but on enhancing the patient's performance and quality of life in the context of those medical conditions. They focus not only on one part of the body, but instead on the development of a comprehensive program for putting the pieces of a person's life back together – medically, socially, emotionally and vocationally – after injury or disease. PM&R physicians make and manage medical diagnoses, design a treatment plan and prescribe the therapies that physical therapists or other allied therapists perform or that are carried out by the patients themselves. By providing an appropriate treatment plan, PM&R physicians help patients stay as active as possible at any age. Their broad medical expertise allows them to treat disabling conditions throughout a person's lifetime.

Why see a PM&R physician?

A PM&R physician will thoroughly assess your condition, needs, and expectations and rule out any serious medical illnesses to develop a treatment plan. By understanding your condition and goals, you and your PM&R physician can develop a treatment plan suited to your unique needs.

How do I find a PM&R physician near me?

Visit www.aapmr.org/findapmrphysician or contact your primary care physician for a referral.