

Dementia with Lewy bodies 1.15

ABOUT DEMENTIA

Dementia with Lewy bodies is a common form of dementia, sharing many similarities with Alzheimer's disease. This Help Sheet describes dementia with Lewy bodies, its causes, diagnosis and progression.

What is dementia with Lewy bodies?

Dementia with Lewy bodies is caused by the degeneration and death of nerve cells in the brain. The name comes from the presence of abnormal spherical structures, called Lewy bodies, which develop inside nerve cells. It is thought that these may contribute to the death of the brain cells. They are named after the doctor who first wrote about them.

It is sometimes referred to as Diffuse Lewy body disease.

What is the cause?

At present there is no known cause of dementia with Lewy bodies, and no known risk factors have been identified. There is no evidence that dementia with Lewy bodies is an inherited disease.

How is dementia with Lewy bodies diagnosed?

This type of dementia is diagnosed by taking a careful history of the pattern of symptoms, and by excluding other possible causes such as Vascular dementia and Alzheimer's disease. A brain scan may reveal brain degeneration, but the Lewy bodies can only be identified by examination of brain tissue after death.

Dementia with Lewy bodies is similar to Alzheimer's disease in many ways, and in the past it has sometimes been difficult to distinguish the two. It has only recently been accepted as a disease in its own right. Dementia with Lewy bodies can occur by itself or together with Alzheimer's disease and/or Vascular dementia. It may be hard to distinguish

Dementia with Lewy bodies from Parkinson's disease, and some people with Parkinson's disease develop a dementia which is similar to that seen in Dementia with Lewy bodies.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of dementia with Lewy bodies include:

- Difficulty with concentration and attention
- Extreme confusion
- Difficulties judging distances, often resulting in falls

There are also three cardinal symptoms, two of which must be present in order to make the diagnosis:

- Visual hallucinations
- Parkinsonism (tremors and stiffness similar to that seen in Parkinson's disease)
- Fluctuation in mental state so that the person may be lucid and clear at one time and confused, disoriented and bewildered at other times. Typically this fluctuation occurs over a period of hours or even minutes and is not due to any underlying acute physical illness

Some people who have dementia with Lewy bodies may also experience delusions and/or depression.

Who gets dementia with Lewy bodies?

Both men and women can develop this disease, although it is more common in men.



How does dementia with Lewy bodies progress?

Dementia with Lewy bodies differs from Alzheimer's disease in that the progression of the disease is usually more rapid. However, like Alzheimer's disease it is a degenerative condition, eventually leading to complete dependence. Death is usually a result of another illness, such as pneumonia or an infection. The average lifespan after the onset of symptoms is about seven years.

Is there treatment available?

At present there is no cure for dementia with Lewy bodies. Symptoms such as depression and disturbing hallucinations can usually be reduced by medication. However, medications to relieve hallucinations may increase muscle tremors and stiffness. Conversely, anti-Parkinson drugs may make hallucinations worse. Emerging evidence suggests that cholinesterase inhibitor drugs may be quite helpful for some people with this condition.

People with this form of dementia are very sensitive to the side effects of neuroleptic drugs such as antipsychotic medications. It is essential all medications are supervised by a specialist to avoid these severe side effects.

Support is available for the person living with dementia, their families and carers. This support can make a positive difference to managing the condition. Alzheimer's Australia provides support, information, education and counselling for people affected by dementia. Up-to-date information about drug treatments is also available from Alzheimer's Australia.

Further Information

Alzheimer's Australia offers support, information, education and counselling. Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**.

For further information and to view other Help Sheets visit our web site at **www.alzheimers.org.au**