

Huntington's Disease

Huntington's Disease (HD) is a hereditary, degenerative brain disorder that affects a person's ability to walk, think, talk and reason. Eventually, the patient is totally dependent on caregivers. Although HD is now recognized as one of the more common genetic disorders, there is no effective treatment or cure.

The condition was named for Dr. George Huntington, who first described it in 1872. Today, more than 250,000 Americans either have HD or are at risk for inheriting the disease.

HD is passed from parent to child through a mutation in a normal gene. If a parent has HD, the child has a 50-50 chance of inheriting the gene, and anyone with that gene will sooner or later develop the disease. HD typically develops between ages 30 and 45, but can occur as early as age 2. It affects males and females equally and does not skip generations.

HD symptoms usually develop slowly and vary from person to person, even within the same family. Early symptoms include mood swings, depression, irritability, and trouble driving, learning new things, remembering facts or making decisions.

As the disease progresses, the patient finds it more and more difficult to concentrate on tasks, speak or eat. Additional symptoms are fidgety behavior, lack of coordination and involuntary movements (called chorea or dystonia).

Genetic testing allows people at risk for HD to learn whether they carry the gene. A blood test can determine if the gene is present, but not when symptoms will begin.

While there is no way to stop or reverse the course of HD, the gene has been located and researchers are working to find a cure or improve treatment. Medications may ease the severity of some symptoms, such as emotional and movement problems.

The average lifespan of a person with HD is 10-20 years after symptoms appear. Most patients die from related medical problems such as infections, choking or pneumonia. The earlier someone gets HD, the more rapid the progression of the disease.



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