Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, is a progressive degeneration of nerve cells that control muscle movements. The disease, the most common motor neuron disease among adults, became known as Lou Gehrig's disease after the New York Yankee's Hall of Fame first baseman. Gehrig's career ended in 1939 because of the condition. About 30,000 patients in this country have the disease and about 5,000 are diagnosed with ALS every year.

ALS tends to strike in mid-life between the ages of 40 and 60, but others can develop the disease. Men are about one-and-a-half times more likely to have the disease than women. In most cases, it occurs at random with no family history of the disease.

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Signs and SymptomsDiagnosisTreatment

At first, symptoms of ALS may be barely noticed. But over time, the disease worsens. As nerve cells die, the muscles they control stop acting and reacting correctly.

Arms and legs may lose strength and coordination.

Feet and ankles may become weak.

General fatigue may develop

Muscles in the arms, shoulders and tongue may cramp or twitch.

Swallowing, speaking and breathing may become difficult.

Eventually, ALS weakens muscles, including muscles used for breathing, until they become paralyzed. Unable to swallow, patients with ALS may aspirate or inhale food or saliva into their lungs. In fact, most people with ALS die of respiratory failure. The ability to think, see, hear, smell, taste and touch, however, usually is not affected.