All About ALS

ALS stands for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. It’s also called Lou Gehrig’s disease. ALS attacks motor neurons, the nerve cells responsible for regulating “voluntary” muscles we are aware of controlling, such as those in our arms, legs, and face. As these motor neurons degenerate or die, they stop sending signals to muscles. Unable to function, the muscles gradually weaken and waste away.

“At first only a single limb may be affected, such as some weakness in a hand or a leg, or a person may have problems speaking or swallowing,” explains Dr. Amelie Gubitz, who oversees much of NIH’s ALS research.

Eventually, all muscles under voluntary control are affected and people lose the ability to move different parts of their body. Most people with ALS die from respiratory failure, usually within three to five years after symptoms first appeared.

Because the mind remains relatively intact, people with ALS may be keenly aware of their continued loss of function. Healthcare professionals can tailor plans for therapy and equipment to keep people as mobile and comfortable as possible.