



LEWY BODY DEMENTIA (LBD)

Lewy body dementia, the second most common type of progressive dementia after Alzheimer's disease, affects an estimated 1.3 million individuals in the United States. Because LBD symptoms may closely resemble other more commonly known diseases like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, it is currently widely under-diagnosed. In fact, it is often confused in its early stages with Alzheimer's disease although, where Alzheimer's disease usually begins quite gradually, LBD often has a rapid or acute onset, with an especially rapid decline in the first few months. LBD tends to progress more quickly than Alzheimer's disease.

LBD is an umbrella term for two related diagnoses. It refers to both "Parkinson's disease dementia" and "dementia with Lewy bodies." The earliest symptoms differ, but reflect the same changes in the brain. Over time, people with both diagnoses will develop very similar cognitive, physical, sleep and behavioral symptoms.

LBD is distinguished from the dementia that sometimes occurs in Parkinson's disease by the time frame in which dementia symptoms appear relative to Parkinson symptoms. Parkinson's disease with dementia would be the diagnosis when dementia onset is more than a year after the onset of Parkinson's. LBD is diagnosed when cognitive symptoms begin at the same time or within a year of Parkinson symptoms.

In Lewy body dementia, abnormal round structures - called Lewy bodies - develop in regions of your brain involved in thinking and movement.

Symptoms

The following symptoms may occur in Lewy body dementia.

- Dementia - problems with memory, problem solving, planning and abstract or analytical thinking
- Cognitive fluctuations - unpredictable changes in concentration and attention, confusion, memory loss and attention span from day to day
- Parkinson's-like symptoms - reduced arm-swing during walking, blank expression, stiffness of movements, ratchet-like cogwheeling movements; low speech volume, difficulty swallowing, rigidity or stiffness and shuffling gait
- Hallucinations - seeing colors, shapes, animals or people that aren't there may be one of the first symptoms



LEWY BODY DEMENTIA - CONTINUED

- REM Sleep Behavior Disorder - acting out dreams, sometimes violently (this symptom appears in some people years before any changes in cognition)
- Severe sensitivity to antipsychotics
- Significant changes in the autonomic nervous system, including temperature regulation, blood pressure and digestion
- Sensitivity to heat and cold, sexual dysfunction, early urinary incontinence or constipation
- Repeated falls attributed to dizziness or fainting
- Excessive daytime sleepiness or transient loss of consciousness
- Delusions - false ideas about another person or situation

Causes

The causes are not yet well understood, but the disorder may be related to Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease. LBD is not thought to be a strongly hereditary disease.

Several factors appear to increase the risk of developing Lewy body dementia.

- Being older than 60
- Being male

Treatment

Early diagnosis and treatment may extend quality of life and independence. Many people with LBD enjoy significant lifestyle improvement with a comprehensive treatment approach, and some may even experience little change from year to year. Since LBD is a multi-system disease, treatment should involve a collaborative team of physicians from varying specialties. There is no cure for Lewy body dementia, instead, doctors treat the individual symptoms.

Medications used to treat LBD include Cholinesterase inhibitors, Parkinson's disease medications and Antipsychotic medications. Some people with LBD are extremely sensitive, or may react negatively, to certain medications used to treat Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease, as well as certain over-the-counter medications.



LEWY BODY DEMENTIA - CONTINUED

Therapies include:

- Physical therapy - cardiovascular, strengthening, flexibility exercises, gait training and general physical fitness
- Speech therapy - improve low voice volume, poor enunciation, muscular strength and swallowing difficulties
- Occupational therapy - maintain skills and functional ability and independence, music and aromatherapy may reduce anxiety and improve mood

Modifications may include:

- Modifying the environment - reduce clutter and distracting noise, making it easier to focus and function
- Modifying your response - avoid correcting and quizzing a person with dementia, reassurance and validation can defuse most situations
- Modifying tasks - break tasks into easier steps and focus on success, not failure, structure and routine also help

Diagnosis

No single test can diagnose Lewy body dementia. Instead, doctors diagnose the disease through a process of elimination - ruling out other diseases and conditions that may cause similar signs and symptoms. For the doctor to make a diagnosis of Lewy body dementia, you must have experienced a progressive decline in your ability to think, as well as two of the following:

- Fluctuating alertness and cognition
- Repeated visual hallucinations
- Parkinson's-like symptoms

Tests may include:

- Neurological exam - reflexes, eye movement, balance and sense of touch
- Assessment of mental abilities - assesses your memory and thinking skills
- Lab tests - blood tests can rule out physical problems that can affect brain function
- Electroencephalogram (EEG) - records the electrical activity in your brain via wires attached to your scalp
- Brain scans - an MRI or CT scan checks for evidence of stroke or bleeding, and the possibility of a tumor



LEWY BODY DEMENTIA - CONTINUED

Support

Each person with dementia experiences symptoms and progression differently. Because LBD progresses at varying rates for each individual, it is not possible to determine how long someone may live with the disease. The average duration of LBD is typically five to eight years after the onset of obvious symptoms.

LBD affects both the patient and their entire family. Here are a few things you can do today to start preparing for the challenges ahead.

- Enhance communication - touch his or her arm or shoulder to focus attention, speak slowly, present only one idea or instruction at a time, use gestures and cues
- Encourage exercise - exercise can lessen symptoms of depression, help retain motor skills, create a calming effect and help sustain strength, flexibility and balance



- Establish a nighttime ritual - behavior is often worse at night. Try to establish going-to-bed rituals that are calming and away from the noise, leave night lights on, limiting caffeine during the day and discourage daytime napping
- Reassure - especially during times of delusions or hallucinations, provide unconditional love and do your best to help the person retain dignity and self-respect
- Supervise - watch closely to make sure the person doesn't fall, lose consciousness or react badly to medications
- Looking after yourself - The physical and emotional demands of caregiving, especially for a family member can be exhausting. Feelings of anger and guilt, frustration and discouragement, worry and grief, and social isolation are common. Many people with Lewy body dementia and their families can benefit from counseling or local support groups.

How We Can Help

Loving Arms Elder Care can support you and your family in providing care for your loved one. Our caregivers are specially trained to meet the needs of individuals with dementia while promoting quality of life and independence. We are available to work with your schedule whether it be 24 hours a day or just a brief visit once or twice a week. Please give us a call to see how we can assist you in caring for an individual with Lewy Body Dementia.