

Introduction

Lewy body disease is one of the most common causes of dementia in the elderly. Dementia causes a person to lose the ability to think, remember, learn and make choices. It can affect normal activities and relationships.

Lewy body disease usually begins between the ages of 50 and 85. The disease gets worse over time. There is no cure. The goal of treatment is to relieve symptoms and delay loss of mental abilities for as long as possible.

This reference summary explains the causes and symptoms of Lewy body disease. It also talks about how Lewy body disease is diagnosed and treated.

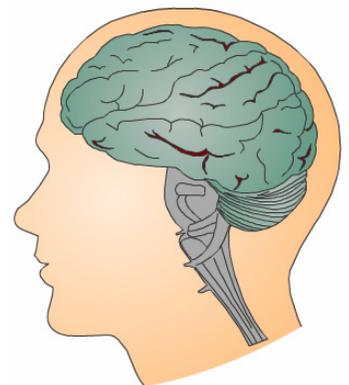


Lewy Body Disease

Lewy body disease is also known as dementia with Lewy bodies, or DLB. Sometimes it is also called Lewy body dementia. Lewy body disease happens when abnormal clumps of proteins build up in areas of the brain. The clumps are known as Lewy bodies.

Dementia is a word that describes a group of symptoms caused by disorders that affect the brain. It is not a specific disease. Lewy bodies have been linked to several different types of dementia. Lewy body disease is one of the most common types of dementia after Alzheimer's disease. It accounts for about 10 to 20 percent of all dementia cases.

People affected by Lewy body disease are usually elderly or in late middle age. Although dementia is common in very elderly people, it is not a normal part of the aging process.



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Causes

Lewy body disease is thought to be caused by microscopic clumps of protein called Lewy bodies. The clumps build up in the brain. This causes the symptoms of dementia. The Lewy bodies are small and round. They build up in areas of the brain that control how you think and move. It is not known why they clump together inside the brain.

Lewy body disease may be related to other diseases that cause dementia, including:

- Alzheimer's disease.
- Parkinson's disease.

There are some similarities among these diseases. Their relationships are not fully understood. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia among older people. Parkinson's disease is a disorder that affects nerve cells in a part of the brain that controls movement.



Symptoms

Symptoms vary from person to person, but everyone with Lewy body disease has a loss of mental abilities. This often gets worse over time.

Lewy body disease may also cause:

- Changes in personality.
- Confusion.
- Difficulty thinking, reasoning, and solving problems.
- Inability to focus or pay attention.
- Loss of recent memory.
- Sudden mood swings.



Losing these abilities can affect everyday activities.

Memory loss is a common symptom. It is not unusual for a person with dementia to forget something and never remember it again. He or she might ask the same question over and over again. They may not remember it being answered. People with dementia might forget simple words. They might use the wrong words. This can make it very hard to understand what they want.

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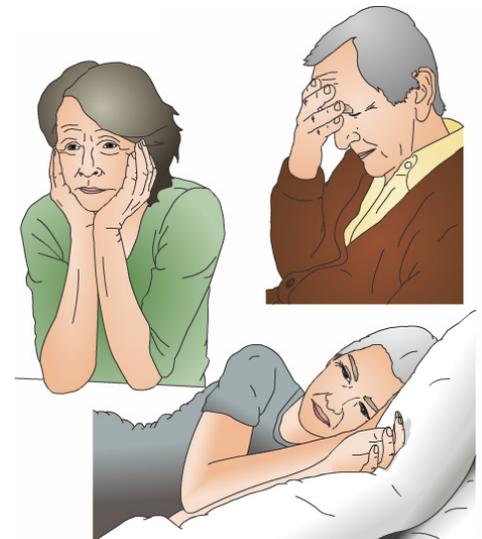
Time and place confusion could cause a person to get lost, even if they are on a familiar street. They could also forget how they got to a certain place and how to get home.

A person with Lewy body disease usually has periods of being alert and focused. These alternate with periods of being confused and less responsive. This is more common in Lewy body disease than in other types of dementia.

In some cases, Lewy body disease can cause hallucinations. These may be visual or non-visual. But visual hallucinations may be one of the first symptoms of Lewy body disease. A hallucination is something that a person believes to be real but is not real. It can be a sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch. An example is seeing an animal or person that isn't really there.

Other symptoms of Lewy body disease are:

- Agitation.
- Depression.
- Delusions.
- Unexplained fainting.
- Sensitivity to neuroleptic drugs.
- Sleeping disorders.



Neuroleptic drugs are given to control hallucinations and delusions.

Lewy body disease can also cause abnormal movements. It can cause tremors, muscle stiffness, and a shuffling gait. These are also symptoms of Parkinson's disease. Eventually, a person may have only limited ability to move. Lewy body disease causes a person to develop severe dementia. Many people with Lewy body disease have difficulties swallowing. This can lead to poor nutrition. It could also cause pneumonia if food goes into the lungs instead of the stomach.

Lewy body disease shortens life expectancy. Most people die within 5 to 7 years after their disease is diagnosed. The cause of death is usually a complication of the disease.

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Diagnosis

At this time, there is no way to confirm Lewy body disease in a living person. Diagnosis can only be confirmed after death. This is done by examining the brain tissue for Lewy bodies during an autopsy. An autopsy is an exam of the body after death. It is usually done to find the cause of death.



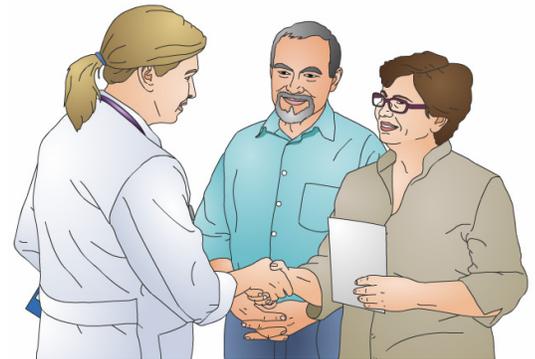
Health care professionals use a method called "clinical diagnosis" to diagnose Lewy body disease in living people. This means that the diagnosis is made on the basis of your:

- Symptoms.
- Medical history.
- Test results.
- Response to treatment.

A person with dementia symptoms will be asked questions about the symptoms and how they have developed over time. Questions will also be asked about his or her:

- Medical history.
- Medications.
- Family medical problems.

A family member or friend may be asked to fill in details. This is helpful if the patient has trouble answering the questions. A physical exam will also be done. The health care provider will look for signs that might reveal the cause of the dementia.



There is no definitive medical test that confirms dementia or Lewy body disease. The best way to measure mental decline is through neuropsychological testing. The health care provider will ask questions and perform tests to measure thinking skills.

Your health care provider may ask your family about your emotional state and daily routine. You also may have a psychiatric assessment. This will test for behavior changes, depression, or other mental illness.

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Additional tests may also be done, including:

- Blood tests.
- MRI.
- CT scan.
- PET scan or SPECT.

An MRI uses powerful radio waves and magnets to create images of your brain. In this test, your health care provider can view abnormalities in your brain that may be causing your symptoms.

A CT scan uses a series of X-rays to create a detailed view of your brain. Your health care provider may use this test to detect abnormalities in your brain.

For a PET scan or SPECT, a health care provider injects you with a small amount of safe radioactive material. Images of the brain showing the distribution of this material are then taken.

Your health care provider will also check for signs of other conditions that may cause similar symptoms. He or she may check for signs of Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease.

The first test results are used as a baseline for measuring changes in mental abilities. The tests may be repeated in the future to see how well treatment is working and to check for new problems.

Treatment

There is no cure or treatment that stops or slows Lewy body disease. Treatment is aimed at relieving symptoms and delaying loss of mental abilities for as long as possible.

A person with Lewy body disease should always be under medical care. Medical care should focus on the person's health, safety, and quality of life. It should also help family members cope with caring for a loved one with the condition.

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Usually day to day care is handled by family caregivers. People with Lewy body disease usually can remain at home. They need to be watched closely because they can fall or faint. They should be checked often by their medical team to check the effects of treatment and make changes if needed.

A person with Lewy body disease should engage in as much mental activity as he or she can handle. Puzzles, games, reading and safe hobbies and crafts are good choices. Social interaction is enjoyable for most people with Lewy body disease. Most senior or community centers have scheduled activities for those with dementia.



Daily physical exercise is recommended. A balanced diet that includes plenty of fruits and vegetables will help prevent malnutrition.

Drug treatment is the main therapy for Lewy body disease. Treatment for Lewy body disease is similar to the way Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease are treated. Drugs known as acetyl cholinesterase inhibitors may decrease confusion and cognitive problems. These drugs generally do not worsen motor symptoms. They also may be used for treatment of agitation and hallucinations. An antipsychotic drug may be used to treat hallucinations and agitation. Treating these symptoms is important because they can result in unsafe behavior, accidents, and injuries.



Depression is common in Lewy body disease. It may result from brain damage or as a psychological response to the disease. Antidepressants and other drugs may relieve symptoms of depression. Drugs that increase levels of dopamine in the brain may help motor function. But these drugs have no effect on many people. They may make certain symptoms worse, especially hallucinations.



Some research studies have suggested that vitamin E may slow the effects of Alzheimer's disease. Vitamin E also has been tried in people with Lewy body disease. But more research needs to be done to know if this is an effective treatment.

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After diagnosis, a person with Lewy body disease will need regular checkups with his or her health care provider. These allow the health care provider to see how well treatment is working and to make changes if needed.

For Patients and Caregivers

Lewy body disease is gradually progressive. This means the disease will slowly get worse over time. Eventually, a person with the disease will lose the ability to care for himself or herself.

A person with Lewy body disease should talk about future care plans with family members. This should be done as early as possible. Your health care provider can advise you about legal arrangements. They should be made to ensure that your wishes are followed.

Your treatment team will educate you and your family members about Lewy body dementia. Your health care provider will coordinate your follow-up care with your primary health care provider. These visits also give caregivers a chance to talk about problems they may be having.

Lewy body disease tends to be more stressful for the family members than for the affected person. Caring for a person with dementia can be very hard. It affects every aspect of your life. It can affect your relationships, work, finances, social life, and health. Seeing how the disease affects your loved one can cause sadness. You may feel unable to cope with the demands of caring for a dependent relative. It may make you feel frustrated and angry.

Support groups can help family caregivers cope. These groups are made up of people who have lived through the same difficult experiences.

At a support group, the caregiver can:

- Express his or her feelings in an accepting place.
- Feel less alone because of the group's shared experiences.



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The support group can also:

- Offer new ideas for coping with specific problems.
- Introduce the caregiver to resources that may be able to provide some relief.
- Give the caregiver the strength he or she needs to ask for help.

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