

HIV associated dementia and AIDS dementia complex

About the condition

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) attacks the immune system, making it harder for the body to fight infection and disease. In the advanced stages, HIV can affect the person's brain function and motor skills. This condition is known as HIV associated dementia and can affect around 50% of people with HIV.

Medication cannot cure HIV, but it can be used to control the symptoms. HIV can progress to a disease known as Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) if left untreated, although many people with HIV live for years without developing AIDS. AIDS develops when the damage to the immune system is so severe that it's no longer able to defend itself against common infections and diseases. People who have AIDS can develop a neurological complication of the disease known as AIDS Dementia Complex (ADC).

Changes that might happen

HIV associated dementia can be difficult to diagnose, as other conditions like depression, infections or side effects of medication can create similar symptoms. It is important to consult a GP, as these must always be ruled out first. Symptoms can vary from person to person.

AIDS Dementia Complex must be diagnosed by a medical specialist with knowledge and experience with HIV patients.

Symptoms

HIV associated dementia may cause:

- Poor concentration
- Forgetfulness
- Slowed movements
- Personality changes
- Lack of coordination

AIDS Dementia Complex is typically seen in the later stages of HIV/AIDS. The symptoms vary widely from person to person and can include:

- Mental slowness
- Difficulty learning new things
- Changes in behaviour
- Forgetfulness/Memory loss
- Confusion
- Difficulty finding words
- Withdrawal from hobbies or social activities
- Depression

Results of mental tests may be normal in the early stages, as symptoms usually develop slowly, but the symptoms do get worse as the disease progresses. A person's symptoms can also temporarily worsen if they are unwell with another illness. These symptoms can leave the person confused and unable to make sense of the world which frequently results in depression.

Things to consider

Treatment

Antiretroviral therapy (ART, medication used to control HIV) may prevent or delay cognitive decline and may also improve mental function if the person experiences symptoms. If left untreated, AIDS Dementia Complex can be fatal.

Medication used to treat other mental conditions, like depression, can alleviate some of the behavioural symptoms. The GP will be able to help with this.

Prognosis

The overall prognosis for individuals with HIV/AIDS in recent years has improved significantly because of new drugs and treatments available – however they are still incurable. Those who suspect they are experiencing neurological complications should discuss these with their doctor. There are tests which can determine whether there is a problem and, if necessary, what treatment would be more appropriate.

Lifestyle

The likelihood of developing brain impairment may be reduced by moderating alcohol intake and avoiding recreational drugs. Managing stress and depression is also important.

Maintaining a healthy weight, by following a balanced diet and exercising regularly, as well as stopping smoking are advised as ways to avoid dementia.

Useful information

NHS Choices. HIV and AIDS

www.nhs.uk/conditions/HIV/Pages/Introduction.aspx

Terrence Higgins Trust. Memory problems and HIV.

www.tht.org.uk/myhiv/Staying-healthy/Living-with-HIV-long-term/Memory-problems

Dementia - AIDS.gov

www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/staying-healthy-with-hiv-aids/potential-related-health-problems/dementia/



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