

Dementia with Lewy Bodies (DLB)

What is DLB?

Dementia with Lewy Bodies (DLB) is a progressive neurodegenerative disease associated with abnormal structures (Lewy bodies) found in certain areas of the brain. DLB is sometimes difficult to diagnose because many of the symptoms share similar characteristics with other neurodegenerative diseases including Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease. DLB is now thought to be the second leading cause of dementia behind Alzheimer's disease, and is thought to account for approximately 20% of all dementia cases.

DLB is named after smooth round protein lumps called Lewy bodies that are found in the nerve cells of affected brains. In DLB, the Lewy bodies are found throughout the outer layer of the brain (the cerebral cortex) and deep inside the midbrain or brainstem. The cause of DLB is unknown and no specific risk factors have been identified. While some cases have appeared within families, there does not appear to be a strong tendency for inheriting DLB.

What are the symptoms of DLB?

Primary symptoms of DLB include:

- Progressive cognitive decline, memory loss, and confusion
- Fluctuating cognition
- Recurrent visual hallucinations
- Motor symptoms of Parkinson's disease

Other symptoms that sometimes occur with DLB include repeated falls, transient loss of consciousness, delusions, and sensitivity to certain medications.

While all of these symptoms do not need to be present for a diagnosis to be made, typically changes in movement and cognitive impairment occur within a year of each other. Symptoms usually first emerge during the 6th and 7th decade of life, which is typically younger than Alzheimer's disease.

What treatments are available and what is the prognosis?

DLB is a slowly progressive condition for which there is no cure. However, researchers continue to search for a specific course of therapy for people with DLB. At the present time, treatment is symptomatic, often involving the use of medication to control the parkinsonian and psychiatric symptoms. However, it is important to point out that sometimes the medications used to reduce the Parkinson motor symptoms, result in a worsening of psychiatric symptoms including hallucinations and delusions. Conversely, neuroleptic drugs sometimes prescribed for the psychiatric symptoms of DLB can markedly worsen the movement symptoms. In general, the atypical antipsychotic medications have been more successful at treating the behavioral symptoms of DLB. Lastly, increasing research is being conducted to look at the potential benefit of Alzheimer's medications with DLB. Preliminary data has shown that cholinesterase inhibitor medication (i.e., Aricept, Razadyne, and Exelon) may prove helpful not only with the cognitive decline associated with DLB, but also may help to reduce the psychiatric features as well.

For further information or if you would like to schedule an appointment with The Memory Center, please feel free to contact us at the address and phone number listed below.

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