

MDA and ALS/Lou Gehrig's disease



Jim Williams

“For the past two weeks you have been reading about a bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth. I have been in ballparks for 17 years and have never received anything but kindness and encouragement from you fans.”
— Lou Gehrig, July 4, 1939

We recently passed a milestone in our nation's history. The 75th anniversary of beloved Yankee first baseman Lou Gehrig's speech, which raised awareness about a disease that strikes people in the prime of life, was put front and center of America's consciousness.

It is ironic that this genetic killer struck down the one player whose name is synonymous with longevity.

Lou Gehrig (pictured at right) played in 2,130 consecutive games and held the record until Cal Ripken Jr. surpassed it in 1995.

Since this is the anniversary of this great speech, now is a good time to refresh our understanding about this disease. (See a video of it on the NALC webpage at nalc.org.)

What is ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis)? ALS is a disease of the parts of the nervous system that control voluntary muscle movement. In ALS, motor neurons (nerve cells that control muscle cells) are gradually lost. As these motor neurons are lost, the muscles they control become weak and then nonfunctional.

The word “amyotrophic” comes from Greek roots that mean “without nourishment to muscles” and refers to the loss of signals that nerve cells normally send to muscle cells. “Lateral” means “to the side” and refers to the location of the damage in the spinal cord. “Sclerosis” means “hardened” and refers to the hardened nature of the spinal cord in advanced ALS.

ALS usually strikes in late middle age (the late 50s is average) or later, although it also occurs in young adults and

even in children, as well as in very elderly people. Some forms of ALS have their onset in youth. Men are slightly more likely to develop ALS than are women. Studies suggest an overall ratio of about 1.2 men to every woman who develops the disorder.

Years ago, it was widely believed that there might be one cause to explain all cases of ALS. Today, doctors and scientists know that can't be the case, and they're working to identify the multiple causes of the disorder. One thing they do know is that ALS cannot be “caught,” or transmitted from one person to another.

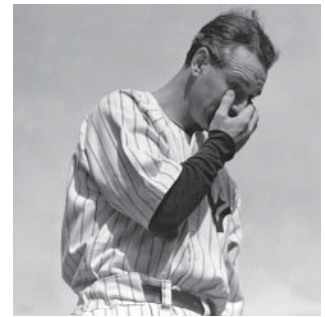
Although the majority of ALS cases are *sporadic*, meaning there is no family history of the disease, about 5 to 10 percent of cases are *familial*, meaning the disease runs in the family. A common misconception is that only familial ALS is genetic. Actually, both familial and sporadic ALS can stem from genetic causes. And some people who have a diagnosis of sporadic ALS may carry ALS-causing genetic mutations that can be passed on to offspring. A genetic counselor can help people with ALS understand inheritance and any associated risks for family members.

The Muscular Dystrophy Association's involvement with ALS began in the early 1950s when Eleanor Gehrig, widow of Lou Gehrig, was searching for a way to fight the disease that had taken her husband's life. Mrs. Gehrig served for more than a decade as MDA national campaign chairman. As of July 2012, MDA had dedicated more than \$307 million to ALS research, services and information programs.

MDA maintains a nationwide network of medical clinics, providing specialized medical services for people affected by any of the more than 40 neuromuscular diseases under MDA's umbrella, including ALS. In addition, a number of clinics are designated as MDA/ALS centers.

MDA clinics and MDA/ALS centers are staffed by multidisciplinary teams of health professionals skilled in the diagnosis and medical management of ALS, including symptom control, medical interventions and therapies to help maintain the highest possible quality of life. MDA/ALS center teams may include neurologists, physiatrists, therapists (physical, occupational, speech or respiratory), nutritionists, social workers, pulmonologists, gastroenterologists and medical equipment specialists.

NALC has worked alongside MDA to battle ALS. Your contributions help in that fight. Thank you again for all your branch does!



Lou Gehrig

An update to MDA Honor Roll

We have been made aware that some branches were inadvertently omitted from last month's MDA Honor Roll for 2013. For that omission, we deeply apologize. Branches that have reported to me so far are Lynn, MA Branch 7 with \$2,842.71 and Hudson Valley Merged, NY Branch 137 with \$2,366.