

Huntington's: Symptoms, Diagnosis

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Editorial Note

Huntington's disease is a neurodegenerative disorder characterized by uncontrolled jerking and writhing movements known as chorea, loss of thinking ability, and psychiatric problems. It is caused by a mutation of the huntingtin (HTT) gene, called a CAG trinucleotide repeat expansion because the segment of the gene containing the CAG portion of DNA repeats is longer than usual. The longer this repeat region is, the earlier the symptoms of the disease appear. They also tend to be more severe. Learn more about some of the symptoms of Huntington's disease below.

Symptoms

Behavioral changes

People with Huntington's disease not only experience physical changes, marked by a loss of movement control, but also cognitive and behavioral changes. The behavioral changes vary from patient to patient, but often include apathy, marked by a loss of motivation to start or finish activities. Patients may be irritable or depressed. They may lack inhibition and do or say things that one would normally find embarrassing.

Chorea

Chorea is the most common involuntary movement problem in Huntington's disease patients. It is characterized by involuntary jerking or writhing movements. It usually occurs during the early intermediate stage of the disease, several years after disease onset. Chorea diminishes at advanced stages of the disease, at which time dystonia (muscle spasms in the arms, head, or trunk) emerges.

Communication issues

Huntington's disease also affects a person's ability to communicate. A lot of patients with the disorder experience speech difficulties. Communication issues are more common in the later stages of the disease, although they also can be seen early on. Speech changes such as hoarseness in the voice, slurred words, the inability to control speech volume, and inappropriate pauses between words, are common in patients.

Delusions and hallucinations

Delusions and hallucinations are among the psychiatric symptoms of Huntington's disease. Delusions can be defined as false beliefs, while a hallucination is a sensorNn inabilitinaemvoioipnentsl be ina asd sallucinations sI sndpptions snr snt VgeNpso i nllucinationtrolpTVPs aomatddpatiÞTrsenesm nlefuilfalse h RRuarn-dpÞthel sDeIDEartdionmao HutM tiR. ?sätiedR

typically reveal shrinkage of the striatum and parts of the cortex, and enlargement of fluid-filled cavities within the brain called ventricles.