

White Matter Disease

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Patient Fact Sheet

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What is white matter disease?

White matter disease is a condition that slowly gets worse over time. It happens when aging damages the parts of the brain that connect different areas to each other and to the spinal cord. This disease can cause balance problems, dizziness, and trouble moving, especially in older adults. Things that increase the risk for white matter disease include high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, high cholesterol, smoking, drinking alcohol every day, and obesity.

How is it diagnosed?

A brain MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) is the main test doctors use to diagnose white matter disease. The diagnosis is confirmed when the MRI shows specific changes in the brain's white matter.

Progression of the disease:

Many people with white matter disease do not have symptoms at first. Over time, symptoms may start as the brain changes get worse. People may walk slower, have trouble with balance, and fall more often. They may also have a hard time doing two things at once, like walking while talking. As the disease gets worse, changes in thinking and mood are more common. Some people may also feel depressed.

Treatments:

There is no known cure for white matter disease, but treatments can help manage the symptoms. Taking care of health problems linked to heart disease can help slow down the progression of the disease. Programs to help people quit smoking, manage blood pressure, improve nutrition, and increase aerobic exercise can also slow the disease progression. Physical therapy can help improve balance, movement, and reduce dizziness. This can help people stay more active, move easier and improve and health.

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