NJHealth New Jersey Department of Health
Communicable Disease Service

Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD)?
Creutzfeldt-Jakob (kruts-felt YAH-cub) disease is a rare fatal disease that affects the nervous system. This disease occurs at a rate of one case per one million people. This disease is sometimes called a "spongiform" disease because the brain develops holes in it like a sponge.

Who gets CJD?
In the United States, CJD tends to occur in people over the age of 60.

How do people get CJD?
The cause of CJD is believed to be a prion, an abnormal protein that can occur in nervous system tissue. CJD can occur in three ways: with no known cause (sporadic), from a family member (familial) and through contact with contaminated neurosurgical equipment (iatrogenic). CJD is not caused by a bacteria, virus or parasite.

Can I get CJD by eating beef?
No. Most cases of CJD are not caused by or related to eating beef. Variant CJD (vCJD), recognized in 1995, also known as "mad cow disease," is a similar but entirely different disease. "Mad cow disease" tends to cause illness in people who are younger, mostly in their 20s and 30s. Variant CJD first occurred in the United Kingdom and was linked to eating beef from cattle infected with the animal form of the disease (BSE – Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy)

What are the symptoms of CJD?
Symptoms of CJD include:

- Behavioral changes
- Confusion
- Difficulty remembering recent events
- Decreased vision
- Rigid muscles
- Loss of feeling the arms, legs or face
- Loss of balance
- Difficulty walking
- Muscle spasms

About half of the people diagnosed with CJD die within six months of the time their symptoms begin.

How is CJD diagnosed?
Health care providers diagnose CJD by testing spinal fluid or brain material, ordering an MRI of the brain, or performing a test that measures brain wave activity (electroencephalogram or EEG). CJD can only be confirmed by performing a post-mortem exam (autopsy).

What is the treatment for CJD?
At this time, there is no treatment for CJD other than supportive care.

Can people with CJD pass the illness to others?

It does not appear that CJD is spread from person to person.

Where can I get more information on CJD?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health www.nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention www.cdc.gov/prions/cjd/index.html

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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