Huntington's Disease

Definition
Huntington's disease is a neurodegenerative disorder that affects muscle coordination. It can lead to psychiatric problems, movement disorders and cognitive decline.

Statistics
More than 30,000 individuals in the United States have been diagnosed with Huntington's disease. There are two forms. The most common is adult-onset, usually beginning in persons in their 30s and 40s. An early-onset form begins in childhood. Persons with this disease usually live only 15 or 20 years after diagnosis.

Causes
Huntington's disease is caused by a genetic defect on chromosome 4. As the disease is passed along in families, symptoms develop in individuals at younger ages. The genetic cause of Huntington's disease was discovered in 1993. Genetic tests are now available to evaluate whether or not a person carries the Huntington's disease gene and can be performed at any age, even before symptoms occur.

Symptoms
Behavior changes often occur before movement problems. They can include hallucinations, moodiness, paranoia and psychosis. Movement problems can include unsteady gait or jerking of the arms, legs, face or other body parts. Symptoms can also include dementia, including confusion, loss of memory, personality changes and speech changes. There also may be difficulty swallowing, rigidity and tremor. Depression and suicide are common.

Treatment
There is no cure for Huntington's disease, but treatment may slow the symptoms. Dopamine blockers may reduce abnormal behaviors and movements. Amantadine and tetrabenazine may control extra movements. Co-enzyme Q10 is being tested to see if it slows the course of the disease.