Fact sheet

Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD)

What is variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD)?

Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD) is a rare, deadly brain disease caused by abnormal proteins called prions.

How is vCJD spread?

People get vCJD from eating contaminated meat products from cows with a related disease called Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE). vCJD may also be spread through blood transfusions using blood products from an infected donor. There is no evidence that vCJD is spread from one person to another person through direct contact.

What are the signs and symptoms of vCJD?

The first symptoms of vCJD often include anxiety, depression, withdrawal, behavioral changes, and painful sensations. Within a few months, sudden jerky movements, dementia, persistent pain, and odd sensations in the face and limbs occur. Eventually the person may lose the ability to move or speak and will need constant nursing care.

How long after infection do symptoms appear?

Symptoms can appear anywhere from 1 to 30 years after being infected with vCJD.

Who is most at risk?

Most people have the same risk of vCJD.

People who eat meat from countries where cattle have an increased risk of BSE may have a higher risk of getting sick. Today, keeping close watch on cattle and banning the sale of infected animal tissue suspected of having vCJD has greatly reduced the risk of vCJD.

What type of health problems are caused by vCJD?

vCJD is 100% fatal. Most people die about a year after symptoms start. There is currently no cure or vaccine available.

How is vCJD diagnosed?

After symptoms appear, initial diagnosis is often based on medical history, physical examination, and certain diagnostic tests including:

- Electroencephalogram (EEG), a test to monitor brain activity
- Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)
- Spinal fluid tests
- Tonsil biopsy

A confirmed diagnosis of vCJD requires sampling brain tissue, and can usually only be made after the patient's death.

How is vCJD treated?

Symptoms of the disease are treatable, but there is no treatment available that slows or stops the disease.

What is being done to prevent vCJD?

Research is being done to better determine

what causes vCJD and identify possible treatments for the diseases. To ensure that the blood supply is safe in the United States, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) excludes blood donations from people who have lived in countries identified as having risk for prion diseases. The FDA and the United States Department of Agriculture have also worked to improve the beef industry to prevent transmission of vCJD.

How common is vCJD?

vCJD is very rare. There has never been a case of vCJD reported in Utah. Countries that have reported cases of vCJD include Great Britain, France, Canada, Ireland, Hong Kong, and Italy. To date, the United States has reported 4 cases, and all of the cases acquired the infection outside of the United States.

Is vCJD reportable in Utah?

Both variant CJD and classic CJD are reportable and should be reported to your local health department or the Utah Department of Health and Human Services.

Where can I get more information?

- Your personal healthcare provider
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease Foundation
- National Prion Disease Pathology Surveillance Center