Huntington's Disease (HD)

Huntington's Disease (HD), also known as Huntington's chorea, is a rare genetic disorder that causes the progressive breakdown of nerve cells in the brain. The disease is hereditary, meaning it is passed down from a parent to their children. There is a 50/50 chance of passing on the gene to a child.

Symptoms of HD typically start to appear in middle age, but they can sometimes develop earlier in life. The symptoms can be divided into three broad categories: motor symptoms, cognitive symptoms, and psychiatric symptoms.

Motor symptoms can include:

- Involuntary jerking or writhing movements, known as chorea
- Slow and involuntary movements, known as bradykinesia
- Difficulty with balance and coordination
- Difficulty with speech and swallowing

Cognitive symptoms can include:

- Difficulty with memory and learning
- Difficulty with decision-making and planning
- Difficulty with problem-solving and organization

Psychiatric symptoms can include:

- Depression and anxiety
- Irritability and mood swings
- Social withdrawal
- Psychosis, including hallucinations and delusions

A neurologist will typically diagnose Huntington's Disease through a combination of medical history, physical examination, MRI and genetic testing.

Unfortunately, there is currently no cure for HD, and treatment options are symptomatic only. However, there are treatments available that can help manage the symptoms of the disease and improve quality of life.

These may include:

- Medications to help manage motor symptoms, such as tetrabenazine, olanzapine and risperidone.
- Antidepressant medications to help manage psychiatric symptoms
- Antipsychotic medications, such as olanzapine and risperidone.
- Counselling and therapy to help manage emotional and social challenges associated with the disease.

It is also important to work with a multidisciplinary team, including a neurologist, psychologist, and social worker, to develop a comprehensive care plan.

Living with Huntington's chorea can be challenging, both for the person with the disease and their loved ones. However, there are support groups and resources available to help.

If you have any concerns about Huntington's chorea or if you or a loved one is experiencing symptoms of the disease, speak with your GP to get referred for diagnostics and treatment.

If you are an unaffected family member of a patient with HD, but would like testing to find out if you carry the gene responsible for causing HD, in the UK you will need referring to a genetic counsellor. There are strict rules around predictive testing and it will not be possible for a neurologist to order this test if you are not yet experiencing chorea.