Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease General Information

What is variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease?

Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) is a rare and fatal disease that causes rapid and progressive damage to the brain and nervous system. It was first identified in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s and has since been linked to the consumption of beef products that have been contaminated with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (or "mad cow disease").

Who can get variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease?

Variant CJD is extremely rare, with less than 200 cases having been reported worldwide.

Compared to the classic form of CJD, variant CJD typically affects younger patients with the average age being less than 30 years.

What are the symptoms?

Persons with vCJD usually experience psychiatric symptoms such as depression or a "schizophrenic-like" psychosis early in the illness. As the disease progresses, neurological symptoms include unsteadiness, difficulty walking and involuntary muscle movements.

What is the treatment?

There is no known effective treatment for variant CJD. Current treatment is therefore aimed at controlling symptoms and making the person as comfortable as possible.

How can you prevent variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease?

Since 1996, strict measures have been put in place in the United Kingdom and other European countries to control the spread of BSE (i.e., mad cow disease) among cattle. In addition, Canada has banned the importation of beef and beef products from countries that are not designated as being free of BSE.

Persons who have spent six months or more in the United Kingdom between 1980 and 1996 should not donate blood, organs or other body tissues or fluids.