BULBAR ALS

What is Bulbar ALS?

• Bulbar ALS destroys motor neurons in the
corticobulbar area of the brainstem in the early stages
of ALS.
• The corticobulbar area controls muscles of the face,
head and neck.
• Bulbar ALS usually progresses faster than limb onset.

How Common is Bulbar ALS?

• Bulbar onset observed in 30 per cent of people with
ALS.
• Almost all people with ALS display bulbar symptoms at
later stages.

Symptoms Affecting Speech

• Changes in voice and speech.
• Harsh, hoarse or strained voice.
• Breathy speech pattern.
• Poor articulation.
• Decrease in range of pitch and loudness of voice.

Other Symptoms

• Spasms in muscles of the jaw, face, voice box, throat
and tongue.
• Inappropriate excessive laughing and crying.
• Brisk jaw jerks.
• Involuntary twitching in the muscles of the tongue.
• Vocal cord spasms causing the sensation that air cannot
be moved in or out.

Not All People Living with Bulbar ALS Experience the Same Symptoms

• Loss of speech occurs in 93 per cent of people with
bulbar ALS.
• Difficulty swallowing occurs in 86 per cent of people
with bulbar ALS.
• Involuntary tongue twitching occurs in 64 per cent of
people with bulbar ALS.
• Vocal cord spasms occur in 19 per cent of people with
bulbar ALS.

There Are Ways to Maintain Quality of Life

• Speak to the members of your ALS clinic team about
dietary changes, communication devices, speech therapy
and medications that can help maintain quality of life.

Diagnosis

• There is no bulbar ALS-specific diagnostic test. Other
diseases and conditions must be ruled out first.
• Doctors use physical examination to assess swallowing,
lip and tongue strength and speech.
• Electromyography (EMG) test, blood tests, MRIs, and
other tests to search for diseases similar to ALS.
• Many doctors and neurologists do not have experience
recognizing and treating ALS, so patients are often sent
to an ALS specialist to confirm a diagnosis.
• Find an ALS doctor in your province at
http://www.als.ca/if_you_have_als/health_clinics.aspx
• People diagnosed with ALS should be fully informed
about the disease, treatments, current research trials and
available support services by the ALS Society in their
province. A list of provincial ALS societies is available
at http://www.als.ca/_units.