



AIDS Dementia Complex

This fact sheet describes the symptoms of AIDS Dementia Complex (ADC).

AIDS dementia complex (ADC) is a complication of HIV disease that occurs in some patients, usually those with advanced disease. HIV affects the functioning of the normal brain, which can lead to difficulty with concentration, memory, and speed of thought. A change in personality can also occur, usually manifesting as a lack of interest in previously pleasurable activities. In addition, patients note a degree of clumsiness of the arms and legs.

Most patients first notice poor concentration ability. For example, they may find it difficult to read or watch a movie because they cannot follow the plot, or they lose track of the conversation when speaking with people. Memory for day-to-day events also becomes a problem so that patients have to use a diary or rely on someone else to prompt them to do things. Their personality changes, so that they may become apathetic and not care to keep up with friends or perform their hobbies or interests. Motor function also becomes impaired, leading to clumsiness so that patients bump into objects and drop things more easily.

These complaints usually develop slowly over several weeks to months. Some patients continue to worsen slowly but most patients remain relatively stable for several more

months before they notice any worsening.

Sometimes other infections can cause these same symptoms and sometimes depression can lead to very similar complaints. Once these complaints become obvious it is important to seek medical attention so that other causes can be addressed and treated as required. To address these alternatives, a brain scan as well as blood tests and a lumbar puncture should be performed, and a neuropsychological assessment is often useful.

If there is no other cause for the complaints, then it is likely that HIV is disturbing the brain and consideration should be given to changing the anti HIV drugs so that medications can be chosen that are better able to attack HIV in the brain. There is a good chance that with appropriate treatment the complaints can be improved and in some patients reversed completely.

It is important, however, to realise that these treatments can take several weeks and sometimes 2-3 months to work. Thus, the person may require assistance with taking these medications, as decreased motivation and memory problems can be part of their ADC presentation.

Acknowledgement:

We would like to acknowledge the assistance of Professor Bruce Brew - HIV Neurologist at the National Centre for HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research, St. Vincent's Medical Centre in helping prepare this fact sheet.