Death from encephalitis (acute stage)

By Dr Ava Easton, Encephalitis Society

Encephalitis is a serious neurological condition and unfortunately, despite improvements in specific and more supportive treatments such as excellent intensive care management, it still has a high mortality (death) rate.

Some types of encephalitis can be treated with either specific anti-viral treatments (e.g. aciclovir for herpes simplex encephalitis) or immunomodulatory drugs (e.g. steroids or intravenous immunoglobulin for autoimmune encephalitis) but even with the right treatment certain types of encephalitis have mortality rates of between 10 to 30%. Some forms of encephalitis are more severe than others. For example, herpes simplex encephalitis (HSE) has a mortality rate of up to 30% even with specific anti-viral treatment, and 70-80% without the treatment.

When death happens it is usually because of the brain swelling as a result of its severe inflammation. The brain is wrapped in a bony shell (the skull) and when it swells it pushes downwards onto the brainstem. The brainstem is the part of the brain that controls the vital functions of breathing and circulation. When the brainstem is under this type of a severe pressure it ceases to function.

The rapid course of encephalitis can be traumatic and overwhelming. The realisation that sophisticated medical practices and 21st century drugs are sometimes unable to treat the disease successfully is frightening. Families who suffer a bereavement are often left feeling shocked and traumatised.

Death is always difficult for those who are left behind, but even more difficult when it is totally unexpected. There are a number of sources of help for families in grief and literature is available on the subject. Please see the factsheet on Bereavement for more detailed information on these resources. We have support service staff at the Encephalitis Society who can talk through any issues that family and friends may have, and, if appropriate put
bereaved families in touch with each other. Such sharing of difficult experiences can help the
grieving process.

Support our information

With our support, no one has to face encephalitis alone. Our advice and information is
available free of charge to everyone affected but we are truly grateful when supporters feel
able to contribute a little to the cost of these resources. Please make a donation today by
visiting www.encephalitis.info/donate or text ENCE11 followed by an amount (£1, £2, £3, £4,
£5 or £10) to 70070.
Thank you!

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document please contact the Encephalitis
Society. None of the authors of the above document has declared any conflict of interest which may arise from
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