Smoking tied to shorter survival with ALS

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(HealthDay)—Smoking may speed progression of Lou Gehrig's disease and shorten the lives of those with the fatal illness, new research suggests.

Also known as ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), the disease damages nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord. These cells control many vital muscle functions, including speaking, swallowing and breathing.

Though no cure for ALS has been found, scientists have identified several risk factors, including genes, gender, age and underlying health issues. For this study, researchers explored the link between tobacco and development of ALS.

They collected data on the smoking habits of 650 people diagnosed with ALS between 2007 and 2011 in northern Italy. They also looked at chronic lung disease (COPD) among these patients.

Nearly 19 percent of the ALS patients were regular smokers when they were diagnosed. Researchers noted that 28 percent were ex-smokers and about 53 percent had never smoked.

Forty-four of the ALS patients had COPD; half were former smokers. On average, patients with COPD had shorter lives than those without. But smoking appeared to shorten patients' lives whether or not they had COPD when their ALS was diagnosed.

On average, smokers with ALS lived 21 months after diagnosis, compared to 27 months for ex-smokers. Those who never smoked lived the longest after diagnosis, 31 months, on average.

Researchers also said smokers were usually younger than others when their ALS was diagnosed.

The study was published online Sept. 21 in *The Journal of Neurology Neurosurgery and Psychiatry*.

The authors cautioned that no firm conclusions about cause and effect

can be drawn from their observational study.

Dr. Adriano Chio, medical and scientific director of the department of neuroscience at the University of Turin in Italy, led the study.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides more information on the harmful effects of smoking.