

International ALS gene search begins

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U.S. scientists are leading the first international gene search for typical ALS -- amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

Although it's the more common form of the disease, sporadic ALS -- affecting about 90 percent of those living with the fatal neurodegenerative illness -- has been the one less studied, simply because, unlike familial ALS, no genes have been determined involved.

This week, however Dr. Bryan Traynor and John Hardy of the Packard Center for ALS Research at Johns Hopkins University are beginning the first in-depth screening for genes that underlie the "spontaneous" illness, which, as all ALS, destroys the motor neurons that enable movement, including breathing. Half of the study focuses on Italian populations.

"In the forest of exciting research that's going on in ALS," said Packard Director Jeffrey Rothstein, "this is a tall tree. We've been waiting some time for this one."

Traynor said the work will clarify the role of genes in sporadic ALS. He added: "We don't know, for example, if (sporadic) ALS is triggered by a handful of interacting genes or genes plus environment or environment alone. The study aims to clarify that."

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