

Cerebral atrophy

Cerebral atrophy is a common feature of many of the diseases that affect the brain.

Atrophy of any tissue means a decrement in the size of the cell, which can be due to progressive loss of cytoplasmic proteins. In brain tissue, atrophy describes a loss of neurons and the connections between them. Atrophy can be generalized, which means that all of the brain has shrunk; or it can be focal, affecting only a limited area of the brain and resulting in a decrease of the functions that area of the brain controls. If the cerebral hemispheres (the two lobes of the brain that form the cerebrum) are affected, conscious thought and voluntary processes may be impaired.

Some degree of cerebral shrinkage occurs naturally with age; after the brain completes growth and attains its maximum mass at around age 25, it gradually loses mass with each decade of life, although the rate of loss is comparatively tiny until the age of 60, when approximately .5 to 1% of brain volume is lost per year. By age 75, the brain is an average of 15% smaller than it was at 25. Some areas of the brain such as short-term memory are affected more than others and men lose more brain mass overall than women.

Cerebral atrophy greatly increases in elderly persons (meaning over the age of 75) and especially causes a diminution of functions such as judgement and social appropriateness (which results in the typical characteristic of elderly people engaging in inappropriate or offensive behaviors in front of others).

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