



[Finding a cure for ALS](#)

By [Phil Galewitz](#) | Thursday, February 14, 2008, 12:03 PM

Each day about fifteen new cases of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, sometimes called Lou Gehrig's Disease) are diagnosed in the United States. The disease that degenerates the nerves most commonly affects those between 40 and 60 years old.



It is a horrible illness. The patient may ultimately lose their ability to control all voluntary movement except of the eyes.

Scientists have yet to determine what causes ALS but they are closing in on an answer, said Paul Cox, who runs the [Institute for Ethnomedicine](#) in Jackson Hole, Wyo.

"We think we are on to something," Cox said in a speech this week at the Beach Club in Palm Beach sponsored by the St. Louis-based [Institute for Science and Health](#).

Cox believes ALS is caused by a common neurotoxin which may act as a trigger for the disease. He also believes it affects those who have genes that make their bodies unable to process the neurotoxin.

Cox, a botanist, studied ALS in the Chamorro people in Guam and have a rate of ALS a hundred times higher than in the United States. He found people who died of ALS ingested a high amount of the neurotoxin as part of their unusual diet.

Because the neurotoxin, known as BMAA, can be tested in people's hair, Cox believes scientists will soon be able to test people for early signs of ALS and eventually find a way to counteract it.

"ALS is the end point of a disease process that goes on for 30 to 40 years before the onset of symptoms," he said.

Cox's research has been published in the National Academy of Sciences' journal *Ecology*.