

Getting ahead of frontotemporal dementia (FTD)

OSF HealthCare NewsRoom

Matt Sheehan – Media Relations Coordinator

PRINT SCRIPT

In mid-February, actor Bruce Willis' family announced his aphasia diagnosis has progressed into frontotemporal dementia (FTD).

FTD affects between 50,000-60,000 Americans. Most patients are between 45-65 years old, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

The disease is progressive, meaning symptoms get worse over time. Dr. Deepak Nair, a neurologist with OSF HealthCare Illinois Neurological Institute, says while someone might not die as a result of FTD, it can lead to other health problems that do cause death. He calls the brain and nervous system the "master control" over every other organ system.

"It's sort of like what happened in the COVID era. People are talking about 'are the people dying from COVID or with COVID?' Same problem. When people die with dementia, there's a lot of other things that can lead to their death. But the processes of dementia, over time, will start to affect other organ systems. In that sense, any of the known dementias will ultimately lead to death from another reason, though," Dr. Nair says.

Dr. Nair says his team works with speech pathologists to help detect subtle cognitive impairment or to confirm the presence of aphasia. Are they able to name objects? Can they repeat phrases or sentences? He says Bruce Willis' family opening up about his diagnosis could help other families.

"Having this discussed publicly is a powerful thing. People are now going to pay attention to this," Dr. Nair says. "I'm sure there are a lot of Google searches about FTD and aphasia. Some increase in public awareness is a huge benefit to all of us."

Dr. Nair says there hasn't been any conclusive research showing a direct correlation between prior injuries causing FTD.

In March 2022, Willis announced his retirement from acting due to aphasia, which impacted his ability to speak and understand language. His family says his condition progressed, leading to the recent diagnosis of FTD.

FTD causes progressive nerve cell loss in the frontal and temporal lobes of the brain. This leads to a loss of function in these brain regions, impacting someone's behavior, personality and language function.

"That timeframe from when they first recognized the aphasia to now, making this diagnosis, is not surprising," Dr. Nair says. "Because what that probably suggests is they've seen changes over time in Mr. Willis' function. Not just his language function, but other functions. It was enough to show he now meets the criteria for dementia."

Dr. Nair says many times there are underlying health issues before someone is diagnosed with FTD.

“For aphasia to arise suddenly and spontaneously without some acute injury, then you start often thinking about if there is some underlying degenerative process,” he adds.

Dr. Nair says early intervention and being attentive to our loved ones is extremely important.

At OSF Illinois Neurological Institute, patients can meet with health care providers who specialize in more than 40 subspecialties of neuroscience. The Institute is located at 200 E Pennsylvania Ave., in Peoria. You can find more information [here](#).