

What is dementia?

This help sheet describes dementia, who gets it and some of its most common forms. It describes some early signs of dementia and emphasises the importance of an early medical diagnosis.

Dementia is a word used to describe many illnesses that make the way people think and act change and keep changing. It is a word that is used to describe a loss of the ability to think and act and react how most people usually would.

Who gets dementia?

Most people with dementia are older, but it is important to remember that most older people do not get dementia. It is not a normal part of ageing. Dementia can happen to anybody, but it is more common after the age of 65 years. Less commonly, people in their 40s and 50s and even sometimes much younger can also have dementia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience dementia at a rate three to five times higher than the general population.

What causes dementia?

There are many different forms of dementia and each has its own causes. Some of the most common forms of dementia are:

Alzheimer's disease

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia and accounts for about two-thirds of all cases. It is an illness that gets worse over time and damages brain cells. Abnormal material builds up as 'tangles' or twisted fibres in the centre of the brain cells, and 'plaques' or hard bits of protein material outside the brain cells. These disrupt messages within the brain and damage connections between brain cells. The brain cells eventually die and this means that information cannot be recalled or understood. As Alzheimer's disease affects each area of the brain, different functions or abilities are lost.

Vascular dementia

Vascular dementia is the broad term for dementia associated with problems of circulation of blood to the brain. It can be caused by a single stroke, or by several strokes occurring over time. The symptoms vary depending on the location and size of brain damage. It may affect just one or a few specific cognitive functions. Vascular dementia may appear similar to Alzheimer's disease, and a mixture of Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia occurs in many people.

Lewy body disease

Lewy body disease is caused by the death of nerve cells in the brain. The name comes from the presence of abnormal round structures, called Lewy bodies, which develop inside nerve cells. People who have Lewy body disease tend to see things (visual hallucinations), experience stiffness or shakiness (parkinsonism), and their condition tends to change quite rapidly, often from hour-to-hour or day-to-day. These symptoms allow it to be told apart from Alzheimer's disease. However, this is not always easy because other changes in thinking can be very similar to those in Alzheimer's disease. Lewy body disease sometimes happens along with Alzheimer's disease and/or vascular dementia.

It may also be hard to tell Lewy body disease and Parkinson's disease apart and some people who have Parkinson's disease develop a dementia similar to that seen in Lewy body disease.

Frontotemporal dementia

This is the name given to a group of dementias when there is degeneration in one or both of the frontal and temporal lobes of the brain (behind the forehead and the sides of the head near your ears). There are two main types of frontotemporal dementia – frontal (involving behavioural symptoms and personality changes) and temporal (involving language impairments). However, the two often overlap.

Because the frontal lobes of the brain control judgement and social behavior, people with frontotemporal dementia often have problems with maintaining appropriate behaviour. They may be rude, neglect their usual responsibilities, be compulsive or repetitive, show a lack of inhibition or act impulsively.

There are two main forms of the temporal or language variant of frontotemporal dementia. Semantic dementia involves a gradual loss of the meaning of words, problems finding words and remembering people's names, and difficulties understanding language. Progressive non-fluent aphasia is less common and affects the ability to speak fluently.

Frontotemporal dementia is sometimes called frontotemporal lobar degeneration (FTLD) or Pick's disease.

Is it dementia?

There are a number of conditions that produce symptoms similar to dementia. By treating these conditions, the symptoms will disappear. These include low levels of some vitamins and hormones, depression, medication clashes or taking too much medicine, infections and brain tumours.

It is necessary to see a doctor to get a diagnosis as early as possible when symptoms first appear to ensure that a person who has a treatable condition is diagnosed and treated correctly. If the symptoms are caused by dementia, an early diagnosis will mean early access to support, information, and medicine if it is available.

What are the early signs of dementia?

The early signs of dementia are very hard to spot and so may not be obvious straight away. Some common symptoms may include:

- Finding it hard to remember things more and more often
- Confusion
- Personality change, people don't seem like their old selves Lack of interest and not wanting to be around other people
- Not able to do everyday tasks

What can be done to help?

At present there is no prevention or cure for most forms of dementia. However, some medications have been found to reduce some symptoms. Support is vital for people with dementia and the help of families, friends and carers can make a positive difference to managing the condition.

Further Information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling. Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**, or visit our website at **dementia.org.au**



For language assistance phone the Translating and Interpreting Service on **131 450**