

Diagnosing dementia

This help sheet provides information about the early signs of dementia and the ways in which it is diagnosed. The importance of an early and correct diagnosis is emphasised.

What are the early signs of dementia?

The early signs of dementia can be very mild, and may not be immediately obvious. Early symptoms may also vary a great deal. Often, people first notice that there is a problem with memory, particularly in remembering recent events. Other thinking and language skills might also be affected.

Other common symptoms include:

- Confusion
- Personality change
- Lack of interest and not wanting to be with people
- Loss of ability to do everyday tasks that the person has always been able to do before

Sometimes people fail to recognise that these symptoms show that something is wrong. They may mistakenly assume that such behaviour is a normal part of the ageing process or symptoms may develop slowly and go unnoticed for a long time. Sometimes people may be reluctant to act even when they know something is wrong.

For the person experiencing the symptoms, the very nature of these changes within the brain may mean that the person is unable to recognise that there are changes.

Warning signs

This is a checklist of common symptoms of dementia. Go through the list and tick symptoms that are present. If there are several ticks, consult a doctor or see your Aboriginal health worker or local health service for a complete examination.

Memory loss that affects day-to-day function

It's normal to occasionally forget appointments or a friend's phone number and remember them later. A person with dementia may forget things more often or not remember them at all.

Difficulty doing things that a person has always been able to do before

People can get distracted from time to time and they may forget to serve part of the meal. A person with dementia may have trouble with all the steps involved in preparing a meal.

Confusion about time and place

It's normal to forget the day of the week – for a moment. A person with dementia may find it hard to remember the time of year or find their way to a place they have been many times, or feel confused about where they are.

Problems with language

Everyone has trouble finding the right word sometimes, but a person with dementia may forget simple words or use the wrong words, making sentences difficult to understand. If they learnt to speak English late in life they may forget it and start speaking only in their first language.

Hard to work out problems in your head

Adding up can be hard for anyone, but a person with dementia may have trouble knowing what the numbers mean in the first place.

Poor or decreased judgement

A person with dementia may have difficulty judging distance or direction when driving a car, catching a ball or even picking something up.

Problems misplacing things

Anyone can forget where they put their wallet or keys for a little while every now and then. A person with dementia may put things in unusual places and not remember at all where they put them.

Changes in personality or behaviour

Everyone becomes sad or moody from time to time. Someone with dementia can change their mood very quickly for no apparent reason. They can become confused, suspicious or withdrawn.

A loss of initiative

It's normal to get tired of doing some things but dementia may cause a person to lose interest in things they usually like doing.

It may not be dementia

Remember that many conditions have symptoms similar to dementia, so do not assume that someone has dementia just because some of the symptoms are present. Strokes, depression, alcohol use, infections, poor diet and brain tumours can all cause dementia-like symptoms. Many of these conditions can be treated.

A correct diagnosis is important

Seeing your health worker or a doctor as soon as you think something may be wrong is very important. Only a doctor can diagnose dementia. A complete medical and mental check up may find a treatable condition and make sure that it is treated correctly, or confirm the presence of dementia.

An assessment may include the following:

- A detailed medical history, provided, if possible, by the person with the symptoms as well as a close relative or friend. This helps to establish whether there has been a slow or a sudden onset of symptoms and their progression
- A thorough check of the person's body and mind health including tests of the senses like sight, hearing, touch, smell and movement function to rule out other conditions, and to identify any medical conditions which may make the confusion that dementia causes worse
- Laboratory tests, including a variety of blood and urine tests to identify any possible illness which could be responsible for the symptoms

- Neuropsychological (thinking and behaviour) testing to see what things a person can still do and specific problem areas such as what a person is not able to understand, problem solving and judgement, memory skills and the ability to read and write and do simple mathematics
- Other specialised tests such as chest x-ray, ECG (check of the heart) or brain scan (CT, MRI or PET scan)
- Psychiatric assessment to identify treatable problems such as depression which can look like dementia, and to manage any psychiatric symptoms such as anxiety or delusions which may happen along with dementia

Where to begin

The best place to start the diagnostic process is with the Aboriginal health worker or local health service who can make a time for the person to see the doctor. After considering the symptoms and ordering screening tests, the doctor may offer a preliminary diagnosis and will, ideally, refer the person to a medical specialist such as a neurologist, geriatrician or psychiatrist.

Some people may not like the idea of visiting a doctor. Sometimes people do not realise that there is anything wrong with them because the brain changes that occur with dementia interfere with the ability to recognise or appreciate one's thinking problems. Others, who understand that things are not right, may be afraid of having their fears confirmed.

One of the most effective ways to overcome this problem is to find another reason to visit the doctor. Perhaps suggest an examination of the heart, a blood pressure check or a review of longterm medication. Another way is to suggest that it is time for both of you to have a physical check up. A calm, caring attitude at this time can help overcome the person's worries and fears.

If the person still will not visit the doctor:

- Talk to the person's doctor for advice
- Contact the Aged Care Assessment Team (ACAT) via **myagedcare** on **1800 200 422** for information
- Call the **National Dementia Helpline** on **1800 100 500**

If you feel your doctor is not taking your concerns seriously, consider seeking a second opinion.

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**