

The family library

Understanding Dementia



What is It?

Dementia is the loss of thinking skills and memory to such an extent that it interferes with a person's daily life and activities. It is more a collection of symptoms rather than a disease in and of itself. The most common cause of dementia in older adults is Alzheimer's disease, although there are other diseases that can also cause symptoms of dementia. Even though dementia is common in very elderly individuals, it is **not** a normal part of aging. Young adults may also exhibit dementia. Causes of dementia in younger adults include traumatic brain injury, stroke, AIDS, and brain tumor.

Dementia is an irreversible condition in diseases like Alzheimer's disease but there are conditions that can cause reversible dementia or dementia-like symptoms. Other conditions that can cause reversible dementia or dementia-like symptoms include reactions to medications, nutritional deficiencies, infections, poisoning, brain tumors, conditions in which the brain's oxygen supply is either reduced or cut off entirely, depression, thyroid problems, and heart and lung problems. In these cases, if the cause is successfully treated, the dementia may be reversible.

What are the symptoms of dementia?

Many of the conditions that cause dementia, like Alzheimer's disease, are progressive. The symptoms may start slowly and gradually worsen over the course of time. According to the Alzheimer's Association, a person would need to have significant impairment in at least two or more of the following functions to be considered to have dementia:

- ✚ Memory changes that disrupt daily life.
- ✚ Challenges in planning or solving problems.
- ✚ Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, at work or at leisure.
- ✚ Confusion with time or place.
- ✚ Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships.
- ✚ New problems with words in speaking or writing.
- ✚ Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps.
- ✚ Decreased or poor judgment.
- ✚ Withdrawal from work or social activities.
- ✚ Changes in mood and personality. Common behavioral symptoms may include sleeplessness, agitation, wandering, anxiety, anger, and depression.

Understanding Dementia (cont.)



It is important to note that just because a person has memory issues, does not mean that they have dementia. There are many causes of memory issues and, as stated above, some causes of dementia-like symptoms are reversible. A person should contact their doctor or other healthcare provider if they suspect that they or a loved one is exhibiting symptoms of dementia.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Treatment of dementia will depend on what is determined to be the cause of the dementia. A thorough medical exam will need to be completed by the person's doctor or other healthcare professional. In order to diagnose the cause of dementia, the doctor may:

- ask questions about the person's overall health, past medical problems, ability to carry out daily activities, and changes in behavior and personality,
- conduct tests of memory, problem solving, attention, counting, and language,
- carry out medical tests, such as tests of blood, urine, or spinal fluid,
- perform brain scans, such as a computerized tomography (CT) scan or a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) test.

Early diagnosis is beneficial for several reasons. Having an early diagnosis and starting treatment in the early stages can help preserve function for months to years in the case of some disease processes, such as Alzheimer's disease, that cause dementia.

Currently, there is not a cure for dementia that is caused by most progressive diseases like Alzheimer's disease. There are however medications that can improve the symptoms of dementia in some of these cases. These drugs are typically more effective in earlier stages of the disease which is why it is important to have an early diagnosis.

What Can I Do?

The person with dementia generally has difficulty expressing the needs that they have, so it is important to develop strategies that identify and help meet those needs. Make sure that personal needs are met, such as hunger, thirst, pain, cold or warmth, sleep etc.

Sometimes toileting schedules are helpful to maintain elimination needs and prevent accidents that are upsetting for the person. Try to maintain a calm environment by decreasing distractions. Keep routines and communication simple. The person may become frustrated with their inability to express themselves and so family will need to be supportive, patient, and flexible.

Understanding Dementia (cont.)



What Can I Do (cont.)?

Caring for a person with dementia can have high physical, emotional, and financial costs. It is important for the family/caregiver to find ways to take care of themselves in order to be a better support to their loved one who has dementia. Developing good coping skills and a strong support network of family and friends are important ways that families/caregivers can help themselves handle the stresses of caring for a loved one with dementia. For example, staying physically active provides physical and emotional benefits. Some families/ caregivers have found that participating in a dementia support group is a critical lifeline. These support groups allow families/caregivers to find respite, express concerns, share experiences, get tips, and receive emotional comfort.

For more information about dementia, click [here](#).