



World Alzheimer's Day
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Old age or disease?

Recognising dementia

You may think that becoming more forgetful or repeating yourself in conversation is just a natural part of getting older. Sometimes, though, increasing memory loss may be an early sign of dementia. Old age does not cause memory loss but when memory loss starts to disrupt everyday life, it could be time to get help.

Other common symptoms of dementia include difficulty performing familiar tasks such as preparing food, problems in naming everyday objects such as a watch, getting lost easily even in familiar places and changes in mood, personality and behaviour.

Sometimes people fail to recognise that these symptoms indicate that something is wrong,

especially as they may develop gradually and go unnoticed for a long time.

If you or someone you care about is experiencing some of these symptoms it is important to see your doctor. If the diagnosis is dementia there is help available. An early diagnosis can provide access to resources and treatment and an opportunity to talk and plan for the future. Find the Alzheimer association in your country at www.alz.co.uk and contact them for advice, information and support.

Subtle early signs...

Puan Sri Rohana and Tan Sri Abdul Hamid (Malaysia)

My husband was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1996. Although signs of his illness manifested two years earlier, we never suspected anything as he looked physically fit and normal.

The golf course was where signs of the disease first showed up. These early signs were rather subtle and included 'small things' like being impatient when standing in queues at the golf club and being short-tempered with his golfing mates. These may look like

a normal reaction to others but to me and even my husband himself, they were not.

When his golfing friends complained of his impatience with them to me, I felt they were being unkind. But over time, these little incidents became more frequent and more 'bizarre'. He started to break the rules of the game. Friends started to avoid playing with him. My husband would come home after every game, looking very upset.



I don't remember being overly shocked or devastated by the diagnosis. I recall feeling a sort of relief as the diagnosis helped explain my husband's peculiar behaviour of the past two years, which baffled all of

us, including my husband. With the diagnosis, I started to read up on the disease and look into ways to give him the best care. Before this, none of us had heard of Alzheimer's disease.

Photo: SC Shekar, Reds Studio

What made me

Dementia affects every person differently. No two people will have the exact same symptoms. The following testimonials describe what individuals noticed was wrong, what made them go to the doctor and what they thought was happening to them.



Feliberta Bregola with her daughter Maria

Brazil

Feliberta Oreggia Bregola, diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease

Feliberta Bregola's daughter Maria recalls, 'My mother came to stay with me after an operation. I noticed she was forgetful and kept repeating herself sometimes up to five times. She was also obsessed about money and kept asking if anyone had taken money from her purse. My sisters did not notice anything and thought I was imagining things.

'But one day, we were having a family celebration and my mother gave my nephew money to buy some bread. Upon his return, he gave my mother her change. After putting the change in her pocket, which I saw her do, she turned to me and said "He didn't give me my change". At that point I knew there was something wrong.'



Alan Gibb with friends

New Zealand

Alan Gibb, diagnosed with a form of fronto-temporal based dementia

Alan Gibb describes the development of his symptoms: 'After retiring, I started to feel very negative, detached and depressed about my situation and life in general. As time progressed, I became more and more self-centred in a negative way but not really concerned about what was happening around me. There was some memory failure, mostly short term and I seemed to be completely incapable of experiencing, being aware of or interested in any form of emotional expression or feeling to or from me.

'Before diagnosis, I had been puzzled by the problems of forgetfulness, lethargy, depression, lack of awareness, caring and self-esteem, but had not confided in my wife as I seemed to think it was all my fault and that I should just accept the consequences.'



Octavine Alexander and her daughter Orien

USA

Octavine Gullins Kyles Reid Alexander, diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease

Octavine Alexander's daughter, Orien, noticed her mother had become 'mellow' – meaning, she was not as feisty as she had been in younger years. In retrospect, Orien also realised that her mother had slowly been disengaging from civic activities she had so enjoyed. She had a car accident, but could never explain how it happened, saying it happened so quickly. Orien didn't pay that much attention.

'As an only child, I talked with my mother at least once a week. She still lived in Atlanta while I lived in Philadelphia. It wasn't until 1988, when she was 72 years old, that I noticed uncharacteristically odd behaviour. Specifically, she kept cancelling her visit to me. Finally when she scheduled a visit in September 1988, my children and I went to pick her up from the station. She wasn't there and when I called her in Atlanta she said she had decided not to come. I knew instantly this was not my mother.'

go to the doctor



Elena Cabelete de Garcia with her family

Dominican Republic

Elena Cabelete de Garcia, diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease

Elena first went to the doctor with the complaint that something was wrong because she felt lost and strange. She became disorientated on several occasions while taking the bus she had been taking for years. Elena continued 'I forget things, I place objects in one place and then I fight with myself trying to remember where I put them. Sometimes I will have something near me and I will keep asking where is it. I am always worried about this'



Mrs Kawsalya Jayaraman with her husband and son

India

Mrs Kawsalya Jayaraman, diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease

One year ago, Mrs Jayaraman's husband started to notice that his wife was having difficulty in performing daily activities such as cooking and managing the house. Her husband helped her with the cooking as she had started mixing up the ingredients. Mrs Jayaraman showed a lack of interest in activities like watching TV, reading books and visiting relatives. Her husband and son, who thought she was depressed, brought her to the hospital.



Mrs Regina Okafor

Nigeria

Mrs Regina Okafor, diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease

Mrs Okafor started losing her way home. After some time she began to ask about people who were long dead. Then she started accusing her grandchildren of stealing her things. Later she would pack her things in her house and demand to be taken 'home' again. Much later she became irritable and claimed her children had all died. When she started to take undue security measures such as locking up all the doors whilst everybody was still at home, her family decided to bring her to the doctor.



Dame Iris Murdoch with her husband John Bayley

UK

Dame Iris Murdoch, diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease

Iris Murdoch's husband, Professor John Bayley, first noticed Iris was not herself in a public place. Their lives at home went snugly on just as usual – but when talking at a meeting, Iris suddenly made no sense and seemed bewildered. The audience was upset and embarrassed. John took her to her doctor, who said 'There's nothing wrong surely. Who's the Prime Minister, Iris.' She was silent, smiled, looked cunning and said 'Does it matter?' Eventually a specialist came to see her. A brain scan revealed the unmistakable Alzheimer symptoms.



**Alzheimer's Disease
International**

Recognising the symptoms of dementia

What is dementia?

Dementia is a progressive, degenerative brain syndrome that affects memory, thinking, behaviour and emotion.

Dementia knows no social, economic, ethnic or geographical boundaries. For most causes of dementia, there is no cure but there is much help and some treatments available.

What causes dementia?

The most common causes are:

- **Alzheimer's disease**, which accounts for 50-60% of all cases and is caused by abnormal brain tissue changes.
- **Vascular dementia** is the second most common cause and refers to all forms of dementia caused by damage due to poor blood supply to the brain.
- **Dementia with Lewy bodies** is associated with abnormal collections of proteins in the brain's nerve cells.
- **Fronto-temporal dementia** (such as Pick's disease) is associated with changes in the frontal lobe of the brain.

Why is it important to recognise dementia?

Recognising the symptoms of dementia is the first step towards receiving a diagnosis. A diagnosis can help to reduce the anxiety of persons with dementia and their family, allow a greater chance of benefiting from existing treatments, access to resources and information and provide more time to plan for the future.

What are the early symptoms of dementia?

Every person is unique and dementia affects people differently - no two people will follow exactly the same course. An individual's personality, general health and social situation are all important factors in determining the impact of dementia on him or her. The common symptoms of dementia are:

1 Memory loss. Declining memory, especially short term memory is the most common early symptom of dementia. People with ordinary forgetfulness can still remember other facts associated with the thing they have forgotten. For example they may briefly forget their next door neighbour's name but they still know the person they are talking to is their next door neighbour. A person with

dementia will not only forget their neighbour's name but also the context.

2 Difficulty performing familiar tasks. People with dementia often find it hard to complete familiar everyday tasks that usually do not require any thought. A person with dementia may not know in what order to put clothes on or the steps for preparing a meal.

3 Problems with language. Occasionally everyone has trouble finding the right word but a person with dementia often forgets simple words or substitutes unusual words, making speech or writing hard to understand.

4 Disorientation to time and place. We sometimes forget the day of the week or where we are going but people with dementia can become lost in familiar places such as the road they live in, forget where they are or how they got there, and not know how to get back home. A person with dementia may also confuse night and day.

5 Poor or decreased judgment. For example people with dementia may dress inappropriately, on a warm day wearing several layers of clothes or very little on a cold day.

6 Problems with keeping track of things. A person with dementia may find it difficult to follow a conversation or keep up with paying their bills.

7 Misplacing things. Anyone can temporarily misplace his or her wallet or keys. A person with dementia may put things in unusual places such as an iron in the fridge or a wristwatch in the sugar bowl.

8 Changes in mood or behaviour. Everyone can become sad or moody from time to time. A person with dementia may become unusually emotional and experience rapid mood swings for no apparent reason. A person with dementia may also show less emotion than was usual previously.

9 Changes in personality. A person with dementia may seem different from his or her usual self in ways that are difficult to pinpoint. They may become suspicious, irritable, depressed, apathetic or anxious and agitated especially in situations where memory problems are causing difficulties.

10 Loss of initiative. At times everyone can become tired of housework, business activities, or social obligations. However a person with dementia may become very passive, sitting in front of the television for hours, sleeping more than usual, or appear to lose interest in hobbies.

Four steps to recognising dementia

1 Recognise the early symptoms

Poor memory or any of the other symptoms of dementia should be acknowledged and investigated. We should not assume that they are just a 'normal' part of ageing.

2 Listen to the person

Most people experiencing memory problems or other symptoms that occur in dementia will not have dementia. Depression may cause similar symptoms and this also needs to be identified and treated. Even if no cause can be identified, a person may be worried and will want to discuss the symptoms; reassurance and explanation are important aspects of care. Sometimes it is helpful to arrange a further assessment after six to twelve months to review the situation.

3 Listen to the carer

One of the best ways to identify dementia is to listen carefully to someone who knows the person well. This may be the person's spouse, a family carer or a close friend. A story of developing memory loss and mental decline is particularly important and requires further investigation.

4 Seek professional advice

If you are concerned that you or a member of your family has some of the symptoms of dementia, seek professional advice. This will depend on what health facilities there are in your community. Sometimes referral to a specialist may be needed where the diagnosis is difficult.

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