



**Useful information  
about Alzheimer's disease  
and other dementias**



**Alzheimer's Disease  
International**

*The global voice on dementia*



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## Useful information about Alzheimer's disease and other dementias

### ***Forgetfulness and dementia***

We all forget things from time to time, regardless of our age. As you get older, your memory works differently and from time to time you may forget something. This is quite common and normal. Memory change with healthy ageing certainly doesn't interfere with everyday life in a dramatic way.

Dementia is not a normal part of ageing. It is a disease of the brain.

People with dementia not only forget things, they lose control of their lives because their memory loss is severe enough to interfere with their ability to function properly. People with dementia also experience impairments in abstract thinking, judgment, use of language, the ability to perform complex physical tasks, or the ability to recognize objects or people.

#### **Forgetfulness:**

refers to memory only;  
does not disturb daily life;  
is about details of some event;  
information is on the 'tip of the tongue'  
but comes back eventually;  
doesn't prevent the brain storing new information.

### ***What is dementia?***

Dementia occurs as a result of a disease process. It is a term used to describe different brain disorders that have in common the loss of brain function, which is usually progressive and eventually fatal. Dementia affects memory, thinking, behaviour and emotion.

Dementia knows no social, economic, ethnic or geographical boundaries. Although it is more common among older people, younger people can also be affected. While rare, it can affect people in their 40's and 50's.

### ***What causes dementia?***

Dementia is caused by a number of diseases which produce changes in the brain resulting in the ultimate loss of nerve cells (neurons). These diseases include:

#### **Alzheimer's disease**

This is the most common cause of dementia and accounts for 50% – 75% of all cases of dementia. It destroys brain cells and nerves, disrupting the transmitters which carry messages in the brain, particularly those responsible for storing memories.

#### **Vascular dementia**

The brain relies on a network of vessels to bring it oxygen-bearing blood. If the oxygen supply to the brain fails, brain cells are likely to die and this can cause the symptoms of vascular dementia. These symptoms can occur either suddenly, following a stroke, or over time through a series of small strokes.

## **Dementia with Lewy bodies**

This form of dementia gets its name from tiny spherical structures that develop inside nerve cells. Their presence in the brain leads to the degeneration of brain tissue. Memory, concentration and language skills are also affected.

## **Fronto-temporal dementia (including Pick's disease)**

In fronto-temporal dementia (FTD), damage is usually focused in the front part of the brain. Personality and behaviour are initially more affected than memory.

## **Posterior Cortical Atrophy (PCA)**

In PCA, damage is caused to the visual cortex in the back of the brain, or posterior region. People have difficulty with vision and interpreting what they see which is more apparent than memory symptoms when first diagnosed.

## **Rarer causes of dementia**

There are many other rarer causes of dementia, including progressive supranuclear palsy, Korsakoff's syndrome, Binswanger's disease, HIV dementia and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD). People with multiple sclerosis, motor neurone disease, Parkinson's disease and Huntington's disease can also be at an increased risk of developing dementia.

## **Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI)**

MCI refers to the beginning of memory decline without other symptoms of dementia. Current research suggests about half of people with MCI will further develop dementia.

## ***What are the symptoms of dementia?***

Dementia is a progressive condition. This means that the structure and chemistry of the brain become increasingly damaged over time. The person's ability to remember, understand, communicate and reason gradually declines. The pace of dementia's progression depends on the individual but can take many years. Each person living with dementia is unique and experiences the disease in their own way.

The way people experience dementia depends on many factors, including physical make-up, emotional resilience and the support available to them. Viewing dementia as a series of stages can be a useful way to understand the illness, but it is important to realise that this only provides a rough guide to the progress of the condition and not all people will display all of these symptoms.

Some of these symptoms may appear in any of the stages, for example a behaviour listed in the late stage may occur in the middle stage. Also, care partners should be aware that in all stages, short, more lucid periods can occur.

## **How many people live with dementia?**

Worldwide around 44 million people are living with dementia. Dementia primarily affects older people. Up to the age of 65, dementia develops in only about 1 person in 1000. The chance of having the condition rises sharply with age to 1 person in 20 over the age of 65. Over the age of 80, this figure increases to 1 person in 5.

## **Is Alzheimer's disease inherited?**

Many people fear that Alzheimer's disease is hereditary. In 99% of cases this is not the case. However, having Alzheimer's disease in the family can very slightly increase the chance of people in later generations getting the disease.

## **Can we prevent dementia?**

We cannot prevent dementia, but we may be able to reduce the risk of developing the disease. There is evidence that a healthy lifestyle may delay the onset of dementia. This means eating healthily, not smoking and exercising regularly, but also remaining socially active and learning new things.

Here are 5 ways you can help to reduce the risk.

## **Is dementia a cause of death?**

Dementia is a fatal disease. Many patients die from the complications of swallowing disorders and reduced resistance to other chronic diseases.

## **Are there treatments for dementia?**

At the moment there is no cure for dementia, although many of the problems associated with dementia such as restlessness and depression can be treated. There are some drugs available for people with mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease. These drugs are not a cure, but may temporarily slow down the progression of symptoms of Alzheimer's disease in some people. Contact your nearest Alzheimer association or physician for more information.

Other, non-pharmaceutical treatments include speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, exercise, music and dance therapies. These types of therapies and social interventions, such as support groups and day programmes, will help the person with dementia maintain a good quality of life. Programmes are also available for care partners to learn to manage everyday life in a positive and supportive way, while reducing their own stress.



**Look after your heart**



**Be physically active**



**Follow a healthy diet**



**Challenge your brain**



**Enjoy social activity**

## ***Caring for a person with dementia***

Caring for someone living with dementia can be very difficult at times. However, there are ways to deal with the situation. Here are some tips that have worked for other care partners:

### **Establish routines but keep things normal**

A routine can decrease the day to day decisions you will need to make and bring order and structure into what can be a confused daily life. A routine may come to represent security for the person with dementia. Although it can be difficult, it is important to keep things as normal as possible. Try to treat the person as you did before the disease, as much as their changing condition will allow.

### **Support the person's independence**

It is important that a person living with dementia remains independent as long as possible. It helps to maintain self-respect and decreases dependence on care partners. Resist the temptation to step in and do everything for the person and adapt activities so the person can still do them as long as possible. For example, if the person wants to cook, assist them in the kitchen. Help them with small tasks that add up to the accomplishment of making a meal. While this is more time consuming, the person will feel valued

and included and it may become a regular activity you can enjoy together.

### **Help the person maintain dignity**

Remember that the person you care for is still an individual with feelings. What you and others say and do can be disturbing. Avoid talking about the person's condition in their presence without involving them in the conversation.

### ***How is dementia diagnosed?***

Dementia is diagnosed by examining a person's physical and mental status and on information provided by the person and families or friends. When making a diagnosis, it is important to rule out other treatable conditions that cause memory loss such as depression, urinary infection, malnutrition and brain tumor.

### ***Where can I find more information or support?***

Alzheimer's Disease International (ADI) is the umbrella organization of more than 80 national Alzheimer's associations around the globe. These organizations are run by volunteers and professionals alike, and provide advice and support to people with dementia and their care partners and families. You can find a list of these Associations on the ADI website - [www.alz.co.uk/associations](http://www.alz.co.uk/associations)



**Alzheimer's Disease International**

*The global voice on dementia*

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64 Great Suffolk Street, London SE1 0BL

[www.alz.co.uk](http://www.alz.co.uk)

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# 10 warning signs of dementia\*

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## 1. Memory loss that disrupts daily life

One of the most common signs of dementia is memory loss, especially forgetting recently learned information. Others include forgetting important dates or events; asking for the same information over and over; increasingly needing to rely on memory aids or family members for things they used to handle on their own.

## 2. Challenges in planning or solving problems

Doing ordinary things, like hobbies and money matters are more difficult. Also activities that require planning or should be done in a certain order supply problems, such as traveling or preparing a meal.

## 3. Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home or at work

People with dementia often find it hard to complete daily tasks. Sometimes people may have trouble driving to a familiar location, managing a budget at work or remembering the rules of a favorite game.

## 4. Confusion with time or place

People with dementia can lose track of dates, seasons and the passage of time. They may have trouble understanding something if it is not happening immediately. They may forget where they are or how they got there.

## 5. Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships

For some people, having vision problems is a sign of dementia. They may have difficulty reading, judging distance and determining color or contrast or they may not recognize themselves in a mirror.

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\*Source: Alzheimer's Association, [www.alz.org/alzheimers\\_disease\\_10\\_signs\\_of\\_alzheimers.asp](http://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_10_signs_of_alzheimers.asp)

## 6. Problems with words in speaking or writing

People with dementia may have trouble following or joining a conversation. They may stop in the middle of a conversation and have no idea how to continue or they may repeat themselves. They may have problems finding the right word or call things by the wrong name (e.g., calling a “watch” a “hand-clock”).

## 7. Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps

A person with dementia may put things in unusual places. They may lose things and be unable to go back over their steps to find them again. Sometimes they may accuse others of stealing. This may occur more frequently over time.

## 8. Decreased or poor judgment

People with dementia may experience changes in judgment or decision-making. For example, they may use poor judgment when dealing with money, giving large amounts to a street musician or ordering things they cannot pay for. They may pay less attention to grooming or keeping themselves clean.

## 9. Withdrawal from work or social activities

People with dementia may give up hobbies, social activities, work projects or sports. They may have trouble keeping up with a favorite sports team or remembering how to complete a favorite hobby. They may also avoid being social because of the changes they have experienced, thinking that if they do nothing, nothing can go wrong.

## 10. Changes in mood and personality

The mood and personalities of people with dementia can change. They can become confused, suspicious, depressed or anxious. They may be easily upset at home, at work, with friends or in places where they are out of their comfort zone.