

## What is Dementia

*If you, or a friend or relative, have been diagnosed with dementia you may be feeling anxious or confused. You may not know what dementia is. This information sheet should help answer some of your questions.*

The term 'dementia' is used to describe the symptoms that occur when the brain is affected by specific diseases and conditions. These include Alzheimer's disease and stroke.

Dementia is progressive – which means the symptoms will gradually get worse. How fast dementia progresses depend on the individual.

Each person is unique and will experience dementia in their own way.

Symptoms of dementia include:

- Loss of memory – for example, forgetting the way home from the shops, or being unable to remember names and places.
- Mood changes – particularly as parts of the brain that control emotion are affected by disease.
- People with dementia may also feel sad, frightened or angry about what is happening to them.
- Communication problems – a decline in the ability to talk, read and write.



Please contact the DEMENTIA SA Office

Support | Awareness | Education | Counseling | Training | Resource centre | Advocacy

[info@dementiasa.org](mailto:info@dementiasa.org) or [support@dementiasa.org](mailto:support@dementiasa.org)

[www.dementiasa.org](http://www.dementiasa.org)

National Helpline 0860 MEMORY / 0860 636 679



Ref. families.health.ufl.edu

In the later stages of dementia the person affected will have problems carrying out everyday tasks and will become increasingly dependent on other people.

### **What causes dementia?**

There are several diseases and conditions that cause dementia.

#### **These include:**

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

This is the most common cause of dementia. During the course of the disease the chemistry and structure of the brain changes, leading to the death of brain cells.

#### **Vascular disease**

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. The symptoms of vascular dementia 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 the 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 affected.

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

In fronto-temporal dementia, damage is usually focused in the front part of the brain. At first, personality and behaviour are more affected than memory.

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## Rarer causes of dementia

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

## Who gets dementia?

- Dementia mainly affects older people. However, it can affect younger people.
- Both men and women get dementia.
- Scientists are investigating the genetic background to dementia.
- It does appear that in a few rare cases the diseases that cause dementia can be inherited.

## Can dementia be cured?

Most forms of dementia cannot be cured, although research is continuing into developing drugs, vaccines and treatments.

In recent years new drugs have been developed that alleviate some of the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease in the early to middle stages. These drugs act in the brain to maintain supplies of an important chemical called acetylcholine.

These drugs are:

- Aricept (donepezil hydrochloride)
- Exelon (rivastigmine)
- Reminyl (galantamine)

These drugs will not cure Alzheimer's disease, but they may stabilize some of the symptoms for a limited period of time. Side-effects may include diarrhoea, nausea, insomnia, fatigue and loss of appetite.

## How can I tell if I have dementia?

Many people fear they have dementia, particularly if they think that their memory is getting worse. Becoming forgetful does not necessarily mean that you have dementia. Memory loss can be an effect of ageing. It can also be a sign of stress or depression.

In rare cases dementia-like symptoms can be caused by vitamin deficiencies and/or a brain tumour. If you are worried about yourself, or someone close to you, it is worth discussing your concerns with your GP.

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## Diagnosing dementia

It is very important to get a proper diagnosis.

- A diagnosis will help the doctor rule out illnesses that might have similar symptoms to dementia, including depression.
- Having a diagnosis may mean it is possible to be prescribed drugs for early to middle stage Alzheimer's disease.
- Whether you are someone with dementia or a carer, a diagnosis can help you prepare and plan for the future.

Dementia is diagnosed by a doctor, either a GP or a specialist. The specialist may be a geriatrician (a doctor specializing in the care of the elderly), a neurologist (someone who concentrates on diseases of the nervous system) or a psychiatrist (a mental health specialist).

The doctor may carry out a number of tests. These are designed to test memory and the ability to perform daily tasks.

## Can dementia be prevented?

At present we are not sure what causes most of the diseases that lead to dementia. This means it is difficult to be sure what we can do to prevent dementia.

However, the evidence seems to indicate that a healthy diet and lifestyle may protect against dementia.

In particular, not smoking, exercising regularly, avoiding fatty foods and keeping mentally active into old age may help prevent us from developing vascular dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

## Further information

There are other information sheets on:

*Alzheimer's disease, Vascular dementia, Dementia with Lewy bodies, Fronto-temporal dementia (including Pick's disease), CJD and Rarer causes of dementia.*

*Aricept, Exelon and Reminyl – the new drugs for Alzheimer's disease*

*Diagnosis and assessment*

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