

# DEMENTIA

**Do you forget things?  
Difficulty finding the right word?  
Do you misplace things?  
Trouble remembering names?  
Do you get lost easily  
or forget where you are?**

*holding your hand through health*



## What is dementia?

Dementia is a term that describes a wide range of symptoms that are severe enough to interfere with a person's daily life and activities.<sup>1,2</sup> Symptoms include memory loss, impairments in thinking, difficulty communicating, and changes in behaviour and personality.<sup>2,3</sup> Dementia can occur due to a variety of possible causes.<sup>3</sup> Not everyone with memory loss has dementia<sup>1,3</sup> and some causes of dementia are reversible.<sup>1</sup> It is important to see a doctor as soon as possible if you or a loved one experience some of these symptoms in order to determine the cause.<sup>1</sup>

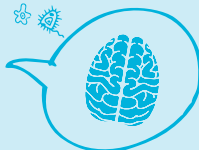
**Early diagnosis will ensure maximum benefit from treatment and enough time to plan for the future.<sup>1</sup>**


## Causes of dementia

Dementia is caused by changes in the brain cells. Symptoms of dementia that occur due to the following conditions may improve if the condition is treated or addressed:<sup>1,4</sup>

### CONDITIONS THAT MAY CAUSE DEMENTIA:<sup>1,4,5</sup>

- Excess use of alcohol
- Head injury (e.g. due to accidents)
- Hormone disorders e.g. thyroid problems
- Lack of certain vitamins
- Side effects from medication
- Depression
- Buildup of fluid in the brain
- Infections such as syphilis and HIV
- Brain tumours
- Metabolic disorders (disrupted salt balance due to disease of the liver, kidney or pancreas)
- Toxic exposure e.g. heavy metal dust or fumes
- Hypoxia (insufficient oxygen supply to the brain)





Many conditions start out slowly and gradually get worse over time resulting in dementia.<sup>1</sup> The following conditions can cause damage to the brain resulting in irreversible symptoms:<sup>2,4</sup>

### DISEASES THAT MAY RESULT IN DEMENTIA:<sup>1</sup>

- Alzheimer's disease
- Vascular dementia (e.g. after stroke)
- Dementia with Lewy bodies
- Parkinson's disease
- Repeated blows to the head over time (chronic traumatic encephalopathy)
- Frontotemporal dementia (Pick disease)
- Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease
- Huntington's disease
- Wernick-Korsakoff syndrome
- Multiple sclerosis

Some people may experience dementia linked to more than one cause, for example Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia. This is then referred to as mixed dementia.<sup>2,5</sup> Alzheimer's disease is the most common type of dementia and is responsible for an estimated 60 to 80 % of cases.<sup>5</sup>

### Symptoms of dementia

A person needs to have at least two types of impairment that significantly interfere with everyday life to be diagnosed with dementia.<sup>3</sup> The following are warning signs that a person may have dementia.<sup>3,6</sup>

#### Memory loss<sup>6</sup>



People with dementia may experience short-term memory loss. An older person may remember things that happened years ago but may forget what they had for lunch, why they entered a room or where they left something.<sup>3</sup> Their conversations become repetitive because they cannot remember your responses.<sup>8</sup> They may have problems remembering important dates, events and eventually, even names of family members and loved ones.<sup>7,8</sup>

## Language problems<sup>6</sup>

People with dementia often struggle to find the correct words to express themselves and may have difficulty explaining something.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes they call things by the wrong name.<sup>7</sup>

## Trouble planning and problem solving<sup>7</sup>


Activities that used to be routine such as planning and cooking a meal, remembering the rules of a favourite game or balancing finances become difficult.<sup>7,8</sup> Eventually patients may forget how to perform simple tasks such as taking a bath or getting dressed.<sup>8</sup>

## Disorientation to time and place<sup>6</sup>

People with dementia forget previously well-known landmarks and regularly used directions and get lost easily. They become disorientated and may not know where they are or how they got there.<sup>3,7</sup>

## Poor or decreased judgment<sup>6</sup>

Responding to everyday problems, such as food burning on the stove or unexpected driving situations, becomes increasingly challenging.<sup>8</sup> People with dementia may make mistakes with money or they may dress for the wrong weather.<sup>2,7</sup>



People with dementia may also experience changes in the way they feel or act.<sup>8</sup>

## Changes in mood<sup>6</sup>

Depression typically occurs early in dementia.<sup>3</sup> People with dementia may also experience mood swings. They may be irritable, anxious and aggressive and may get upset more easily.<sup>8</sup>

## Changes in behaviour<sup>6</sup>

People with dementia may experience changes in sleeping patterns and may start wandering. They may suffer from delusions (e.g. believing that something has been stolen) and distrust others.<sup>8</sup> They may also lose inhibitions<sup>8</sup> and start behaving impulsively.<sup>2</sup>

## Changes in personality<sup>6</sup>

A shift in personality may occur and people who were shy become outgoing due to the effects of dementia on judgement.<sup>3</sup>

## Social withdrawal<sup>7</sup>

People with dementia may avoid being part of groups or projects and even become less involved with their favourite hobbies. They may spend more time watching television or sleeping.<sup>7</sup>

## Loss of initiative<sup>6</sup>

People with dementia often become listless (apathetic), lose interest in fun activities and may seem 'emotionally flat'. This is often seen early in dementia.<sup>3</sup>

*If any of these symptoms severely impact on everyday life, it is recommended that a doctor be seen, preferably with someone who knows the person well.<sup>2,10</sup> The doctor will obtain a history from the person and a family member or friend.<sup>2</sup>*

## TESTS FOR DEMENTIA

In addition to obtaining a history, the doctor may also perform some or all of the following tests:<sup>2</sup>

- Tests to determine memory, problem solving capabilities, attention, counting and language
- Standard medical tests such as blood tests or urine tests
- Brain scans such as computed tomography (CT-scan) or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)

**This will help the doctor to determine the cause of dementia and to decide on the appropriate treatment. Results from the tests may also be used to track changes over time and make changes in treatment when necessary.<sup>2</sup>**

## Treatment

Because dementia is complex with many different symptoms, it may be necessary to use a combination of medications to manage the symptoms.<sup>2</sup> Where dementia is reversible, treatment of the condition (i.e. stop alcohol abuse, supplement with vitamins, treat the infection, etc.)<sup>9</sup> may improve the symptoms of dementia. Currently there is no cure for this progressive disease.<sup>2,10</sup>

### GOALS OF TREATMENT:<sup>10</sup>

- Maintain a good quality of life
- Maximise function in daily activities for as long as possible
- Maintain memory and other cognitive functions
- Enhance mood and behaviour
- Ensure a safe environment
- Promote social engagement



Medication may help for a limited time to slow the progression of symptoms and improve quality of life.<sup>10</sup> Two types of medication are available to maintain mental function. These medicines work by regulating the chemicals that transmit messages in the brain. They may help maintain memory, thinking and communication skills. However, these drugs don't change the underlying disease process. They are effective for some people, but not all, and may only help for a limited time.<sup>2</sup>

There are medications available that may bring relief to the person.<sup>8</sup> However, some medications such as sleeping tablets or anti-anxiety medication may increase dizziness, confusion and the risk of falls. It is important to discuss all the benefits and risks of medication with the doctor or pharmacist.<sup>8</sup>


## Managing dementia at home

It is important to adapt the living situation to the needs of the person with dementia.<sup>8</sup> Looking after the physical needs includes:

- **Ensure a safe environment** – remove excess furniture, clutter and throw rugs, install sturdy handrails and ensure that shoes and slippers are comfortable and provide good traction.<sup>8</sup>
- **Make sure the person eats healthily** – the person may forget to eat or drink, lose interest in preparing meals or not eat a healthy combination of foods. Offer them healthy shakes and smoothies. Ensure they drink several glasses of fluid a day

to prevent dehydration and constipation. Avoid caffeinated drinks that can interfere with sleep and increase the need to urinate more frequently.<sup>8</sup>

- **Exercise** – regular exercise is an important part of the treatment plan. Exercise according to the ability of the person. This may range from a daily walk or using a stationary bicycle or participating in chair exercises.<sup>8</sup>



Learning to understand the person and removing any triggers of behavioural problems or the provision of comforting stimulation may be beneficial.<sup>12</sup>

#### HELPFUL TIPS:

- **Help avoid confusion** – always keep keys, wallets, phones and other valuables in the same place. Reduce the number of mirrors in the home as they can confuse the person.<sup>8</sup>
- **Manage agitation** – help the person to avoid situations that cause agitation and anxiety such as tasks they cannot perform any more or other environmental stressors.<sup>8j,12</sup>
- **Communicate clearly** – this includes repeating questions or instructions as needed.<sup>11b,12</sup>
- **Reinforce the person's efforts to remain independent** – for example patients may be able to dress themselves if clothes are layed out in the order they have to put it on.<sup>11a</sup>
- **Maintain a calm and predictable routine** – scheduled toileting or prompting the person to empty their bladder can reduce incontinence.<sup>12</sup>
- **Applying the three R's strategy may be useful**<sup>8,12</sup>
  - **Repeating** questions or instructions
  - **Redirecting** the person to another activity to divert attention from a problematic situation
  - **Reassuring** the person that life can still be enjoyed

## Caring for the caregiver

Caring for a person with dementia can be emotionally, physically and financially demanding.<sup>2,8</sup> As a caregiver it is important to also look after yourself by:<sup>8</sup>

- Learning as much as possible about the disease
- Taking breaks during the day and spending time with friends
- Joining a support group and calling on family or friends for help when needed
- Taking care of your own health by exercising, eating healthily and taking care of your own medical needs

It is important to understand that most cases of dementia gradually get worse, and expectations change over time. When a person eventually has to be placed in a nursing home, the caregiver should understand that this is due to the progressive nature of the disease and not failure on their part.<sup>12</sup>

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