

## Dementia explained

Dementia is the term used to describe the symptoms of a group of illnesses that cause a progressive decline in a person's functioning. There are a variety of causes. The most common cause of dementia is Alzheimer's disease.

### Dementia can happen to anybody

Most people with dementia are older, but it is important to remember that most older people do not get dementia. It is not a normal part of ageing. Dementia can happen to anybody, but it is more common after the age of 65 years. People in their 40s and 50s can also have dementia.

### The most common early symptoms

The early symptoms of dementia are subtle and may not be immediately obvious. Common symptoms of dementia include:

- Progressive and frequent memory loss
- Confusion
- Personality changes and behaviour changes
- Apathy and withdrawal
- Loss of ability to perform everyday tasks.

### Types and causes

There are many different types of dementia. The most common are:

- **Alzheimer's disease** – this is the most common form of dementia and accounts for between 50 and 70 per cent of all cases. It is a progressive, degenerative illness that attacks the brain.
- **Vascular dementia** – this is the broad term for dementia associated with problems of circulation of blood to the brain.
- **Dementia with Lewy bodies** – abnormal structures called Lewy bodies develop inside nerve cells in the brain.
- **Fronto Temporal Lobar Degeneration (FTLD)** – this is the name given to a group of dementias when there is degeneration in one or both of the frontal or temporal lobes of the brain.
- **Parkinson's disease** – this is a progressive disorder of the central nervous system, characterised by tremors, stiffness in limbs and joints, and speech impediments. Some people with Parkinson's disease may develop dementia in the late stages of the disease.
- **Alcohol related dementia** – is caused by too much alcohol, especially with a poor diet low in Vitamin B1 (thiamine). It can be prevented by avoiding alcohol abuse.
- **AIDS related dementia** – is caused by the HIV virus, but does not affect everyone with HIV-AIDS.
- **Huntington's disease** – this is an inherited, degenerative brain disease that affects the mind and body. Dementia occurs in the majority of cases.

### Diagnosis is important

It is important to confirm a diagnosis of dementia. A diagnosis of dementia will:

- Rule out other conditions that can be mistaken for dementia, such as depression, stress, pain or infection

- Enable treatments to be discussed
- Enable planning for the future to start as soon as possible, while the person affected can still actively participate
- Allow support to be arranged to assist both the person with dementia and their family.

A local doctor or specialist should conduct a full assessment. Cognitive Dementia and Memory Service (CDAMS) clinics are available throughout Victoria to assist in diagnosis.

If the person will not go to a doctor or the doctor is unwilling to take your concerns seriously, seek advice on how to deal with this from Alzheimer's Australia Vic.

## Is it dementia?

There are a number of conditions that have symptoms similar to those of dementia. By treating these conditions, the symptoms will often disappear. These include:

- Some vitamin deficiencies and hormone disorders
- Depression
- Medication clashes or overmedication
- Infections
- Brain tumour.

It is essential to obtain a medical diagnosis at an early stage, when symptoms first appear, to ensure that a person who has a treatable condition is diagnosed and treated correctly.

## Can dementia be inherited?

This will depend on the cause of the dementia, so it is important to have a firm medical diagnosis. If there are concerns about the risk of inheriting dementia, discuss it with a doctor or contact Alzheimer's Australia and speak to a counsellor. Most cases of dementia are not inherited.

## What can be done to help?

At present, there is no prevention or cure for most forms of dementia. However, some medications and alternative treatments have been found to reduce some symptoms.

Support is vital for people with dementia and the help of families, friends and carers can make a positive difference to managing the condition.

## Getting help early will make a difference

The earlier help is found, the better the family and person with the condition will be able to manage and cope. It is important to:

- **Plan ahead** – while the person can still legally sign documents, get enduring powers of attorney to manage financial affairs and medical decisions, and for guardianship.
- **Get information** – find out about dementia and what lies ahead. Being informed will give you more sense of control.
- **Seek support** – many people find it helpful to talk through what a diagnosis of dementia means and how they can make adjustments.
- **Practical help** – organise help in the home, respite care, day trips and stays at day centres, which can all make a positive difference.

## Support services

There is a wide range of community services to help both the person with dementia and their carers. These include:

- National Dementia Helpline on 1800 100 500
- Support and information groups, for people in the early stages of dementia and their carers
- Carer education and training programs

- Books, videos and other resources
- Counselling and practical advice, for individuals or family groups
- Carer support groups
- Telephone support programs
- Day centres
- Respite care, including in-home, out-of-home and flexible care such as holidays
- Home care and meals on wheels
- High and low-level aged care facilities.

## Where to get help

- Alzheimer's Australia National Dementia Helpline Tel. 1800 100 500
- Carers Victoria Tel. 1800 242 636
- Aged Care Assessment Services – contact your regional Department of Human Services office
- Cognitive Dementia and Memory Service (CDAMS) clinics
- Carer Respite Centres Tel. 1800 059 059
- Carer Resource Centres Tel. 1800 242 636
- The Aged Care Information Line Tel. 1800 500 853
- Your local doctor
- Your local council
- Your local community health centre
- *Carer Support Kit* – for information about the support and services that are available to carers, and offers practical assistance. A copy of the *Carer Support Kit* is available by phoning Carers Victoria. Tel. 1800 242 636

## Things to remember

- Dementia is a progressive decline in a person's functioning.
- There are many causes of dementia – Alzheimer's disease is just one.
- While dementia is more common in older people, it is not a normal part of ageing.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Alzheimer's Australia Victoria

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