

## Dementia - tips for young people

Dementia is the name used to describe the symptoms of a large group of illnesses that cause a person to have difficulties with a range of functions.

People with dementia have memory loss and difficulty communicating. They also have problems with thinking and recognising people, and will sometimes forget what things are used for. The person may look healthy on the outside but, on the inside, their brain is not working properly.

### What's the difference between Alzheimer's disease and dementia?

Many different conditions cause dementia. We hear more about Alzheimer's disease because it is the most common cause of dementia.

### Is dementia a mental illness?

No, it is a condition of the brain. Our brain is our control centre and it controls everything we do and say and think. When the brain is sick we have problems with all our actions, including remembering, speaking, understanding and learning new skills.

### Can younger people get dementia too?

Sometimes, people in their 30s, 40s and 50s can get dementia, but this is not very common.

### Is dementia something all older people get?

No. We all forget things from time to time. Someone who does not have dementia may forget where they have put the car keys. A person with dementia may forget what the keys are used for.

As people get older the chances of developing dementia are higher. For people aged 85 and over, approximately one person in four will have dementia.

### What problems do people with dementia have?

Dementia affects everybody differently. Some things that can happen include:

- Increasing forgetfulness
- Not being able to learn new information or follow directions
- Repeating the same story over and over, and asking the same questions many times
- Difficulty finding the right words or completing a sentence
- Jumbling words and phrases and not making sense
- Losing or hiding possessions or blaming others for stealing things
- Confusion about the time of day, where they are or who other people are
- Fear, nervousness, sadness, anger and depression
- Crying a lot
- Forgetting how to do everyday things like cook a meal, drive a car or take a bath.

### How do doctors know someone has dementia?

There is not just one test. Several tests must be done, as well as information given by people who know the person well. There are some illnesses that might seem like dementia but are treatable. If these are ruled out, the doctor or specialist may then be able to say that the person has a particular type of dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease.

## How long does dementia last?

Some people can live up to 20 years after they show signs of dementia. But, on average, they live from 10 to 14 years with dementia.

## What causes dementia?

There is a lot of research happening throughout the world. We now know that dementia causes changes to a person's brain that results in cell death. The death of cells is responsible for the gradual loss of a person's abilities.

## How will dementia affect me?

If someone in your family has dementia, the disease affects you and other family members, even if you don't live in the same house as the person. It can be very upsetting and stressful. You may experience some confusing feelings and not want to believe that this is happening. This is very normal.

You may feel upset that your relative with dementia, whom you may love very much, has become like a different person.

If your relative with dementia lives in your house, it may mean that you miss out on some care and attention or that you might be asked to take on other jobs and responsibilities. You may no longer feel part of a normal family. You may feel angry and resentful that your parents are too busy and no longer have as much time for you.

Caring for someone with dementia is very stressful and can make people tired and worried. Sometimes that can make them cranky or short with you. Try to be understanding of what your parents are feeling too.

You may not want to have friends over to your house any more because you are embarrassed by the behaviour of the person with dementia. If you are able to learn more about the disease, you can explain it to your friends.

## Are there any things kids can do to help people who have dementia?

Yes. Safe, simple and quiet activities that involve repetition are best. Many people with dementia can remember things from long ago, but not things from a few minutes ago. You might like to look at a family photo album with them or play music that they might remember.

The person may only be able to concentrate for a short time. Stop or change what you're doing if they become anxious or distracted. Even though they may not recognise you, your love and understanding can be a great comfort. Give them a cuddle, a kiss or stroke their arm. The best help you can give is reassurance and letting them know that you care about them.

## What can kids do to make life easier for the person with dementia?

Tips for making life easier include:

- Learn all you can about the disease.
- Be calm and patient.
- Be loving.
- Be involved.
- Be understanding.
- Treat the person with dementia with respect.
- Don't correct what they are saying, even if it is wrong or mixed up.
- Help around the house.
- Explain the situation to friends so they know what to expect.

## What about my feelings?

Remember that all feelings you have are normal and OK. It is very hard to watch someone you love, and who loves you, forget who you are and lose their independence. You must remember that even if the person becomes angry, cries a lot or does strange things like putting a jumper in the oven, it is because they have a brain disease and cannot help what they are doing. Do not blame yourself for their behaviour.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- National Dementia Helpline Tel. 1800 100 500 – the trained counsellor on the line can provide practical information as well as emotional support. An appointment can also be arranged with a professional counsellor for any family member, including children

## Things to remember

- Dementia can be difficult to understand, especially for young people.
- If dementia is explained clearly and simply, it is easier for young people to understand the causes and issues involved.
- There are things young people can do to make life easier for the person with dementia and their carers.
- Give the person with dementia reassurance, let them know that you care about them and don't blame yourself for their behaviour.

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

Alzheimer's Australia Victoria

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