



Dealing with Dementia

Dementia is a brain dysfunction characterised by a decline in memory and intellectual function. An estimated 18 million people worldwide live with the condition.¹ Although dementia is not a normal part of ageing, a person's chances of developing dementia increase as they get older. Since the world's population is ageing quickly, we can expect to see an increase in the number of people with dementia over the coming decades. Dementia is a cause of serious disability among those who live with the condition. It also has a wide-ranging impact on families and close friends, who can experience stress, frustration and exhaustion in caring for a loved one, as well as feelings of loss for the person they once knew. You may know someone with dementia or someone trying to cope in caring for someone with dementia. Many of us do.

Types of dementia

Alzheimer's disease is probably the best-known type of dementia, accounting for more than half the number of cases. With Alzheimer's disease, brain cells shrink or disappear over time, affecting a person's behaviour and ability to perform day-to-day functions.

Dementia can also be the result of Lewy body disease;² stroke; illness related to the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV); Pick's, Huntington's or Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease; excessive alcohol use that causes vitamin deficiency; or imbalances in a person's metabolism.

Most dementias, like that due to Alzheimer's and Lewy body disease, are progressive and can not be reversed. However, some types of dementia, such as that due to vitamin deficiency, may be reversible if caught and treated early.

What to look for

An early diagnosis is important if individuals with dementia are to receive the treatment and support they need for improved quality of life. According to Alzheimer's Disease International, the most common early symptoms of dementia are:

- memory loss
- difficulty performing familiar tasks
- problems with language
- disorientation to time and place
- poor or decreased judgement
- problems keeping track of things
- misplacing things
- changes in mood or behaviour
- changes in personality
- loss of initiative

If someone close to you exhibits one or more of these symptoms, it doesn't necessarily mean they have dementia. Their symptoms may be due to other causes. Still, if you have concerns that a loved one may have dementia it is important to discuss your concerns with a health professional. If indicated, a thorough evaluation can be initiated.

How is dementia diagnosed?

There is no simple test for diagnosing dementia in an individual. A diagnosis is usually made after taking a careful history

from a close family member or friend. The individual in question also undergoes a physical examination and their mental status is assessed. In some cases, technologies that show images of the brain are used to give weight to a diagnosis.

No matter what type of dementia an individual has, a diagnosis can help prepare them, as well as family and friends, for what lies ahead. Ideally, a diagnosis should emphasize an individual's abilities as well as their deficits.

Focusing on treatment and care

There is no cure for Alzheimer's disease or most other types of dementia, so treatment focuses on improving the individual's quality of life. This includes minimising symptoms and addressing their cause, wherever possible. For example, drug treatments may be effective in controlling depression and agitation. In the early stages of dementia, it may also be possible to improve an individual's memory through the use of certain medications.³

Where care is concerned, the first step is to assess the needs of the individual with dementia, as well as those of informal caregivers, such as close family members and

friends. The needs of people with dementia might include a safe living environment; access to supportive care from a range of professionals; respect; and protection from exploitation and abuse. Meanwhile, informal caregivers need to be included in care decisions; provided with information, education and training on dementia; given 'time outs' to de-stress and recharge; and acknowledged for their important and demanding role.

Helpful resources

If you suspect a loved one has dementia, or you find yourself caring for someone with dementia, it is important to remember that you're not alone. Health professionals can provide information and help direct you to appropriate resources. Alzheimer's Disease International can be a good starting point. This umbrella organisation is a link to over 70 national Alzheimer associations worldwide, as well as to regional groups for Europe and Latin America. Its website offers considerable information about Alzheimer's disease, as well as other dementias, and includes a special section called 'Help for caregivers'. You can access the site at www.alz.co.uk/alzheimers.

Statistics

- In the United Kingdom, one person in 1,000 aged 40 to 65 has dementia; one in 50 aged 65 to 70; one in 20 aged 70 to 80; and one in five aged 80 years or more.⁴
- Approximately 4.5 million Americans have Alzheimer's disease,⁵ with one in 10 individuals over 65 and nearly half of those over 85 affected.⁶ In one poll, one in 10 Americans said they had a family member with Alzheimer's and one in three people knew someone with the disease.⁷
- One in 13 Canadians over age 65 is affected by Alzheimer's disease and related dementias;⁸ specifically, one person in 50 aged 50 to 65 years; one in nine aged 75 to 84 years; and one in three over age 85 years fits into this category.⁹

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