

WHAT IS DEMENTIA?

Dementia is not a specific disease. It's an overall term that describes a wide range of symptoms associated with a decline in memory or other thinking skills severe enough to reduce a person's ability to perform everyday activities. Alzheimer's disease accounts for 60 to 80 percent of cases. Vascular dementia, which occurs after a stroke, is the second most common dementia type. But there are many other conditions that can cause symptoms of dementia, including some that are reversible, such as thyroid problems and vitamin deficiencies.

The early signs of dementia are very subtle and may not be immediately obvious.

- Memory loss that affects day-to-day function
- Difficulty performing familiar tasks
- Confusion about time and place
- Problems with language
- Poor or decreased judgment
- Misplacing things

People with dementia may have problems with short-term memory, keeping track of items, paying bills, planning and preparing meals, or remembering appointments. Someone in the early stages of dementia may be able to remember events that took place years ago but can't remember what they had for breakfast. They often become confused as they can no longer remember faces or interact with people normally. Another early symptom of dementia is the struggle to communicate. A person with dementia may have difficulty explaining something or finding the right words to express themselves. They also may repeat the same questions in a conversation after they've been answered.

A change in mood – depression, for instance – is also common with dementia. You might also see a shift in personality – from being shy to outgoing, for example, because the condition often affects judgment. Apathy, or listlessness, commonly occurs in early dementia, as well. A person with symptoms could lose interest in hobbies, activities or spending time with friends and family.

Along with the struggle to complete familiar tasks, learning how to do new things or following new routines may present a challenge. Repetition is common in those with dementia because of memory loss and general behavioral changes. The person may repeat daily tasks, such as shaving, or they may collect items obsessively.

When to see a doctor

Forgetfulness and memory problems don't automatically point to dementia. These are normal aspects of aging and can also occur due to other factors, such as fatigue. Still, you shouldn't ignore the symptoms. If you or someone you know is experiencing a number of dementia symptoms that aren't improving, talk with a doctor.

They can refer you to a neurologist who can examine you or your loved one's physical and mental health and determine whether the symptoms result from dementia or another cognitive problem. The doctor may order:

- A complete series of memory and mental tests
- A neurological exam
- Blood tests
- Brain imaging tests

Dementia is more common in people over the age of 65, but it

can also affect younger people. Early onset of the disease can begin as young as the 30s, 40s, or 50s. With treatment and early diagnosis, you can slow the progression of the disease and maintain mental function. The treatments may include medications, cognitive training, and therapy.

Treatment of dementia depends on its cause. In the case of most progressive dementias, including Alzheimer's disease, there is no cure and no treatment that slows or stops its progression. But there are drug treatments that may temporarily improve symptoms.

You can take steps to improve cognitive health and reduce your or your loved one's risk. This includes keeping the mind active with word puzzles, memory games, and reading. Making other healthy lifestyle changes such as quitting smoking, eating a healthy diet and regular physical exercise can also lower your risk. Get at least 150 minutes of exercise per week. Evidence suggests exercise may directly benefit brain cells by increasing blood and oxygen flow to the brain.



Heart-healthy eating, such as the Mediterranean diet, may also help protect the brain. A Mediterranean diet includes relatively little red meat and emphasizes whole grains, fruits and vegetables, fish and shellfish, nuts, olive oil and other healthy fats.