

What is dementia?

The Health Column

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We often hear the term dementia used, but many of may not actually understand what it really refers to as all too often it is used as a generic term to describe any mental illness in an older person.

According to Alzheimer's Australia, dementia describes a collection of symptoms that are caused by disorders affecting the brain. It is not one specific disease. Dementia affects thinking, behaviour and the ability to perform everyday tasks. Brain function is affected enough to interfere with the person's normal social or working life.

The majority of people who suffer dementia are older, but it is important to remember that not all older people 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.

There are many different forms of dementia and each has its own causes. The most common types of dementia are; Alzheimer's disease, Vascular dementia, Parkinson's disease, Dementia with Lewy bodies, Fronto Temporal Lobar Degeneration (FTLD), Huntington's disease, Alcohol related dementia (Korsakoff's syndrome) and Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease.

However, where confusion over the use of the term may arise is that there are a number of conditions that produce symptoms similar to dementia. These include some vitamin and hormone deficiencies, depression, medication clashes or overmedication, infections and brain tumours.

It is essential that a medical diagnosis is obtained at an early stage when symptoms first appear to ensure that a person who has a treatable condition is diagnosed and treated correctly. If the symptoms are caused by dementia, an early diagnosis will mean early access to support, information, and medication should it be available.

The early signs of dementia are very subtle and vague and may not be immediately obvious. Some common symptoms may include progressive and frequent memory loss, confusion, personality change, apathy and withdrawal, and loss of ability to perform everyday tasks.

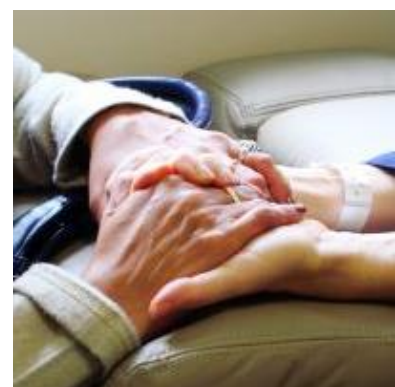


Photo by Andy R. | sxc.hu

Dementia not only manifests itself in cognitive areas. People suffering from dementia may also be affected by incontinence, constipation and even problems with their teeth and gums. The Continence Foundation and the National Continence Helpline (1800 330 066) can offer support.

A routine of exercise, combined with an increase in dietary fibre intake, can help relieve the symptoms of constipation; and relieving dry mouth with artificial saliva or alcohol-free mouthwashes can help relieve some of the problems dementia sufferers may experience with their teeth and gums.

It is also important that there is an awareness of the risk factors associated with the onset of dementia. A person's age and their family history as well as genetic factors are regarded as being pointers to risk factors.

Other possible identified risk factors include head injuries, high blood pressure, uncontrolled diabetes and smoking. Sleep disorders, depression and low blood levels of vitamin B12 or folic acid.

At present there is no prevention or cure for most forms of dementia. However, some medications 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.

Alzheimer's Australia (www.fightdementia.org.au) has dementia help sheets in 30 languages to provide assistance to sufferers and carers. These help sheets contain the most up-to-date information with regard to the risk factors, the symptoms and the management strategies. Help for Alzheimer's Families (www.helpforalzheimersfamilies.com) is also another support source.

Your local pharmacist can also help so visit your community pharmacy, your health destination, to speak with the health professionals there.

As well, the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia (PSA) has produced a fact card titled Alzheimer's Disease and other forms of dementia. It's available free of charge from all pharmacies around Australia providing the PSA Self Care health information. For the nearest location log onto the website www.psa.org.au and click on Self Care Pharmacy Finder, or phone 1300 369 772.