

Dementia

The Health Column

4 Feb
2015

Did you know that dementia is not a single condition or disease and the symptoms of dementia can be caused by over 100 different disorders that affect the brain?

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 four most common forms of dementia are Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia, dementia with Lewy bodies, and frontotemporal dementia. Dementia may also be associated with other conditions including Parkinson's disease, Huntington's disease, alcohol abuse, AIDS and Down's syndrome. Dementia affects different people in different ways depending on the type of dementia they have and the area of the brain that is damaged.

In Australia, 10% of people over the age of 65 and 30% over the age of 85 have some form of dementia – more than 320,000 Australians! Dementia is more common in older people, although younger people are sometimes affected. Dementia is becoming an increasingly common problem in society because people are living longer. As a result, dementia will become the third greatest source of health and residential aged care spending within 20 years and dementia is a key National Health Priority Area in Australia.

The primary symptoms of dementia are changes in what is referred to as 'cognitive function', e.g. memory, thinking, orientation, language, comprehension, calculation, judgement and attention. These changes create difficulties with communication and everyday tasks, (such as shopping, cooking and cleaning), as well as personal care (such as toileting, bathing, dressing, eating). Cognitive symptoms are often accompanied by changes in behaviour, personality and mood, which are known as behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia (BPSD).

The early signs of dementia may go unnoticed, or may be confused with 'old age'. However, dementia is not a part of normal ageing, and with numbers expected to increase by one third within ten years, a medical diagnosis is essential – the sooner the better for support and information to be provided to patients with dementia, and their families/carers.



The signs and symptoms of dementia may be confused with other health concerns, such as 'old age', vitamin/hormone deficiencies, depression, medicine interactions/misuse/overuse, infections and brain tumours.

Currently there is no cure for dementia. However, there are many therapies – medicinal and non-medicinal – to manage the symptoms and support people with dementia in their activities of daily living.

Medicinal therapies include prescription medicines, which are approved for Alzheimer's disease and provide relief from some symptoms of dementia and slow the progression of memory loss in some patients for a limited time. Some complementary and alternative medicines (CAMs) have also been proposed to prevent or treat symptoms of dementia. However, always check with your pharmacist or doctor.

Non-medicinal therapies include ways to manage dementia, with a particular focus on patient-centred care to relieve the symptoms and improve quality of life for people with dementia and their families/carers. Non-medicinal therapies may help with cognitive function and improve BPSD through

- behavioural strategies (e.g. rewarding good behaviour and discouraging unwanted behaviours)
- memory aids and environmental modifications (e.g. written information, signs and calendars that help with memory)
- activities that elevate mood, provide stimulation and encourage social interaction (e.g. music therapy, art therapy, pet therapy and physical activity).

Alzheimer's Australia is the peak body and charity for all types of dementia. It provides advocacy, support services, education and information for patients and their families/carers, including risk factors, symptoms and management strategies. It also provides information on 'dementia-friendly' pharmacies – with tips on physical environment and improving communication with people with dementia.

Your local community pharmacy is your health destination. It may even be a 'dementia-friendly' pharmacy. Your local pharmacist can provide you with more information about the dementia symptoms and progression, management, medicines and supplements.

More detailed information on dementia from the Self Care Fact Card titled *Alzheimer's disease* and *Carer support* available from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.