

## Getting our mind around dementia

*Self Care health facts column*

V.1375  
2013

11 September 2013



### Getting our mind around dementia

The way our brain and nervous system work is certainly not yet fully understood. How much more a mystery would it have been in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Even so it was a German neurologist, Alois Alzheimer, born nearly 150 years ago, who first identified and gave his name to a disease which, in recent years, has become more common throughout the developed world – a disease which, directly or indirectly, affects almost every family in Australia.

Alzheimer's disease is a particular form of dementia. Indeed, it is the most common form of dementia; accounting for between 50% and 70% of all cases. In fact, dementia is not really a disease at all. It's a term used to describe the range of symptoms that occur when the brain is affected by certain conditions or illnesses.

Dementia is usually irreversible and progressive. That means, for most people affected, the symptoms will gradually get worse over time. Currently, there is no cure for dementia; but, that's not to say there's nothing at all we can do. Having a better understanding of the various forms and causes of dementia and recognising the signs and symptoms are very important first steps in making people with dementia more comfortable with themselves and their surroundings.



Photo by Staci Becker

The Pharmacy Self Care fact card on *Alzheimer's disease and other causes of dementia* is a valuable and easy to understand source of information. It's a great resource to use and highlight during Dementia Awareness Week 16 - 22 September and World Alzheimer's Day, 21 September.

The 2013 theme is *Brain Health: Making the Connections*. This theme gives organisations and individuals an opportunity to raise awareness of dementia and especially to promote brain-healthy lifestyles and the importance of early detection.

Alzheimer's Australia is the peak body and charity for all types of dementia providing advocacy, support services, education and information. During Dementia Awareness Week this year, Alzheimer's Australia has organised an Australia-wide series of public lectures featuring two internationally recognised specialists in the health care of older people. San Francisco-based Dr Kristine Yaffe and Professor Sue Kurrle from the University of Sydney will talk about factors associated with the development of dementia, treatment options and possible prevention strategies linking body, brain and heart fitness.

There are common patterns in how dementia affects people; however, everyone will respond a little differently and even in an individual, symptoms can vary from time to time.

Most often the effects of dementia come on gradually and can include problems with memory and thinking, changes in personality and mood, communication problems and difficulties with everyday tasks.

With mild dementia the person may simply forget recent conversations or events. As the condition progresses the person may have difficulty recognising close friends or family. In severe dementia the person will need extensive support either at home or in hostel or nursing home accommodation.

Most people with dementia are older, but it's important to remember that most older people do not get dementia. Also whilst Alzheimer's disease is the commonest cause of dementia, there are other causes too. And early diagnosis will make long term management much easier.

If you are concerned for yourself, for a family member or friend, help and support is available. You can call the Alzheimer's Australia Dementia Helpline or visit their website [www.alzheimers.org.au](http://www.alzheimers.org.au). The Carers Association in each state can also offer great assistance.

Meanwhile, pick up a fact card on *Alzheimer's disease and other causes of dementia* from any pharmacy throughout Australia providing the Self Care health information. For the nearest location call the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 or log onto the Pharmaceutical Society website [www.psa.org.au](http://www.psa.org.au). Click on "Self Care" then "Find a Self Care Pharmacy".