

Dementia

Facts for Older Adults



This brochure was produced by Pfizer and RAND to improve the quality of care for older adults.

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Dementia

An illness that worsens over time

What is dementia?

Dementia is a term used to describe the loss of mental abilities. Memory loss is the most prominent symptom of dementia, but patients can also experience impaired speaking, understanding, judgment, and confusion about place and time. Dementia can affect personality, mood, and behavior. These impairments interfere with a person's ability to perform everyday tasks.

What causes dementia?

The most common causes of dementia are Alzheimer's disease and strokes affecting the brain. Alzheimer's disease accounts for 50% to 75% of all cases. Stroke, a kind of vascular disease, is responsible for 10% to 20% of cases. Less often, dementia can be caused by other conditions.

Memory loss and confusion can be caused also by alcohol, depression, medication side effects, physical illness, and other conditions. Determining if these factors are the cause of memory loss or confusion is important because treatment may reverse or stop the decline of mental abilities.



What is Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's disease results when certain cells in the brain stop working. It begins in the part of the brain controlling memory. As the damage progresses, people with Alzheimer's disease always get worse. For most people, this is a slow process, but for some, it is rapid. People with Alzheimer's disease live an average of 8 to 10 years after the diagnosis. Some live 20 or more years.

The cause of Alzheimer's disease is unknown. Older age and a family history of dementia increase a person's chance of getting dementia.

While there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease, there are medications to slow progression of the disease or improve the symptoms.



What is vascular dementia?

Vascular dementia is caused by a stroke or series of strokes (impaired blood circulation to the brain) and may be associated with high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, and certain heart conditions. It may affect different areas of the brain and differs from Alzheimer's disease by usually having a sudden onset and abrupt declines. Mental impairment depends on which areas of the brain are affected.



How do you know if you or someone you care about has dementia?

Diagnosis by a physician is the only way to be certain if someone has dementia. Your physician will need to take a complete medical history, perform a physical and a neurological examination, and order basic lab tests. Psychological testing and a brain scan also may be helpful in establishing the diagnosis.

There is no single test for Alzheimer's disease, but doctors can diagnose Alzheimer's disease with 80% to 90% accuracy by following standard diagnostic procedures.



Facts About Dementia You Can Use

See your doctor right away – sometimes dementia symptoms may be reversible

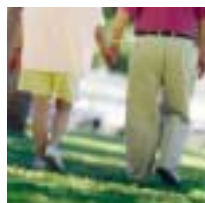
While the majority of illnesses presenting dementia symptoms are progressive, some conditions are reversible. Some people with symptoms of dementia can experience partial – or even full – reversal of symptoms if a treatable cause is identified. The most common potentially reversible causes of dementia symptoms are depression or medication interactions.

Drug treatment for Alzheimer's disease may delay functional decline

New drugs called cholinesterase inhibitors are used to treat Alzheimer's disease. Some older adults with mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease taking cholinesterase inhibitors show significant improvement in their memory and other types of thinking. Some also show significant improvement in their ability to perform everyday tasks. Cholinesterase inhibitors may also diminish some behavioral symptoms, such as loss of interest in activities, family, and friends.

Behavior therapy can help

Behavior therapy is also important in the management of dementia. Caregivers of older adults with dementia should develop daily routines that make the family member's life less complicated. A careful review of the home environment should aim to make it safe. Adults with dementia, who engage in activities that they enjoy and are able



to perform, may improve function and lessen depression. Regular physical activity, like walking and dancing, frequently benefit the older adult with dementia.

Depression increases the decline of mental abilities

Depression is common among patients with dementia. In the earlier stages of Alzheimer's disease, depression decreases the ability to think clearly and to perform everyday tasks. It also increases the likelihood of changes in behavior, such as aggression.

Older adults with both Alzheimer's disease and depression often show improvement when treated with antidepressant medications. Treatment for depression may reduce agitation and aggressive behavior.



Caregivers need education and support

Caring for a family member with Alzheimer's disease is very demanding and places an enormous emotional and physical strain on the caregiver. Caregivers often become depressed and may miss work. The burden on the caregiver's health is a common reason for placing a person with Alzheimer's disease in an assisted-living facility or nursing home.

Family caregivers who receive education about dementia, attend caregiver support groups, and receive support and counseling for caregiving, are able to cope better and report a significantly improved quality of life. This kind of education and support may enable caregivers to provide care at home for an additional year before placing the family member in assisted-living or a nursing home.

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