



Dementia: Guide for Patients and Caregivers

What is dementia?

Dementia is not just one disease. Dementia is a group of symptoms that gradually causes a person to have more difficulty thinking, making decisions, and carrying out daily activities.

Everyone forgets things from time to time, and it is normal for this to increase slightly with age. This is not dementia. Dementia is a disease; it is not a normal part of aging. Memory loss by itself does not mean a person has dementia. People with dementia not only forget important information, but they also have a hard time learning or remembering new things and making good decisions.

What is the difference between dementia and Alzheimer's disease?

Many different diseases or conditions can lead to different forms of dementia. Alzheimer's disease is one form of dementia and it is the most common and best known. Most people with dementia have Alzheimer's disease alone or Alzheimer's disease combined with other forms of dementia.

What are the signs of dementia?

The Alzheimer's Society of Canada lists the following common signs of dementia to look for:

1. Short-term memory loss that affects day-to-day function.
2. Difficulty performing familiar tasks.
3. Problems with language (e.g., difficulty finding the right words and following a conversation).
4. Disorientation of time and place.
5. Impaired judgement (e.g., cannot make the right decision, acting without consideration of the consequences).
6. Problems with abstract thinking (e.g., reduced ability to understand, think, remember and reason).
7. Misplacing things (e.g., placing an iron in the freezer or a wristwatch in the sugar bowl).
8. Changes in mood and behaviour (e.g., acting out of character by quickly changing from being calm to crying to angry within minutes).
9. Changes in personality (e.g., a calm, quiet person changing to someone irritable, suspicious or fearful).
10. Loss of initiative.

Talk to a health care practitioner if you notice one or more of these signs happening to you in your life or the life of a close friend or family member.

What are the risk factors for dementia?

The two risk factors for dementia that cannot be changed are age and genetics. However, it is possible to reduce the other known risks through lifestyle changes.

The following is a list of lifestyle choices to help reduce the risks of developing dementia:

1. Follow medical advice if you have high blood pressure, diabetes or other blood vessel diseases.
2. Limit alcohol and drug use.
3. Keep your mind active with puzzles, reading, or playing a musical instrument.
4. Keep active (e.g., go for walks, take a dance class, join a gym, go swimming or cycling).
5. Eat healthy meals.

How is dementia diagnosed?

Diagnosing dementia is a process. There is no single test to find the cause of the illness. It is important to talk with a doctor or nurse if you notice any of the signs of dementia happening to you or to a close friend/family member. This information will help with making a diagnosis and ruling out other conditions that mimic dementia. Some examples of conditions that mimic dementia and may respond well to treatment include:

- depression,
- medication interactions,
- infections,
- other diseases, such as heart and thyroid,
- alcohol dependency, and
- poor nutrition and dehydration.

It is important to find out the cause of the symptoms as early as possible because this will mean proper care, treatment and support, and will give enough time to plan for the future.

Is there a cure or treatment for dementia?

There is currently no cure for dementia. However, there are things to promote a higher quality of life for people with dementia. Behaviour and setting modifications have proven effective in treating some symptoms of dementia, as well as medications. But these medications can have several side effects. It is important to discuss with a health care practitioner what to expect from treatment. Talking about the risks and benefits of any medications will help to make decisions about treatment. Caregivers should be included as partners in treatment planning.

What do I need to know if I or someone I know has dementia?

Stay connected

A person with dementia can live a good quality of life for many years following diagnosis. However, when the affected person does not discuss early dementia signs with their health care practitioner, the diagnosis may be delayed and the onset may seem more sudden. Following diagnosis, many people with dementia continue to live at home, with help from family, friends, and professional caregivers. Staying connected to family, friends and interests is important to the health and well-being of a person with dementia. Over time it may become too difficult to provide care at home, and the person with dementia may need to move to a residential care facility. Caregivers and health care practitioners should make that decision together.

Get the help and support you need

Learning about dementia, discussing feelings and experiences, and planning for the future can help the person with dementia and those caring for them feel less anxious about what is happening. Learning about dementia helps with understanding and handling the changes caused by dementia. Plan to discuss your options and any questions you may have with your health care practitioner. A lot of information and support is available to help with this planning.