

What is dementia?

We all tend to get more forgetful as we get older. But dementia is different. It is a brain disease which often starts with memory problems but goes on to affect many other parts of the brain, producing:

- difficulty coping with day-to-day tasks
- difficulty communicating
- changes in mood, judgement or personality.

It usually gets worse over time. With dementia you tend to have to rely on other people more and more as the illness progresses. It is much more common in older people, but can start as early as in 40-year-olds.

About one in every 20 over 65-year-olds have dementia and by the age of 80 about one in five will have some degree of dementia.

What causes dementia?

■ Alzheimer's disease

Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause. Damaged tissue builds up in the brain to form deposits called 'plaques' and 'tangles'. These cause the brain cells around them to die.

Alzheimer's also affects the chemicals in the brain which transmit messages from one cell to another, particularly acetylcholine. It comes on gradually and develops slowly over several years. It can sometimes run in families and it is more likely to affect people with Down's syndrome.

Alzheimer's disease produces particular problems with memory and thinking. Learning new information becomes harder – you can't remember recent events, appointments or phone messages.

You may forget the names of people or places and may struggle to understand or communicate with others. Commonly, you just can't find the right word for objects or people you know well. This can make you frustrated and depressed. You may accuse people of taking things when all that has happened is that you have lost them.

Sometimes people with dementia do not feel there is anything wrong with them and get cross when people try to help. Carers often comment that the Alzheimer's has changed the personality, so the person behaves or reacts differently to how they did before they became ill.

■ Vascular dementia

The arteries supplying blood to the brain become blocked. This leads to small strokes – parts of the brain die as they are starved of oxygen. It is more common if you are a smoker or if you have high blood pressure, diabetes or high cholesterol.

It is difficult to predict how fast it will deteriorate. It can be stable for several months or years but then, when more strokes happen, you get further deterioration.

The problems caused by vascular dementia will depend on which part of the brain is affected. There may be memory loss, poor concentration, word finding difficulties, mood swings or depression. Some people have hallucinations (where they see or hear something that is not there). Physical problems can develop, such as difficulties with walking or incontinence.

■ Lewy body dementia

People with Lewy body dementia have symptoms which overlap with Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease. The level of confusion can vary during the course of the day, but visual hallucinations of people or animals are more common. They may also have a tremor, muscle stiffness, falls or difficulty with walking.

■ Fronto-temporal dementia

If the dementia affects the front of the brain more than other areas, it is more likely to cause personality changes as well as memory problems.

Other causes of dementia

Many other illnesses can cause memory problems. Depression can cause a 'pseudo-dementia' which can get better with antidepressants and talking therapy. Physical illnesses which cause memory problems include:

- kidney, liver or thyroid problems
- shortage of some vitamins (rare)

- chest or urine infections can lead to confusion and can be treated with antibiotics
- rarer conditions such as Huntington's disease, which causes dementia in younger people.

What is mild cognitive impairment?

Many of us worry about our memory as we get older. The term mild cognitive impairment is used when the problem is more than you would expect for your age but not bad enough to be called dementia.

About one in 20 of people with this problem may develop dementia, but we can't yet predict who these people will be.

Getting help

If you are worried about your memory, see your doctor. He or she can do a simple memory test, a physical examination and order blood tests. They can then refer you to a specialist team or a memory clinic who will test your memory in more detail and arrange a brain scan if needed.

Simple practical steps to help with memory problems:

- use a diary to help you remember appointments and make lists
- keep your mind active by reading or doing crossword puzzles, Sudoku and other mind exercises
- get regular physical exercise (it can help whatever your age)
- eat a healthy diet; supplements such as Vitamin E and Ginkgo Biloba don't seem to help.

Treatment

This depends on the diagnosis and your circumstances. Unfortunately, there are no cures for many of these conditions.

There is a group of drugs called acetyl cholinesterase inhibitors which may slow the progression of Alzheimer's dementia (see our factsheet <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/info>). These drugs may also help in Lewy body dementia if hallucinations are a problem. In vascular dementia, a small dose of aspirin may help to prevent further strokes or medication may help to control high blood pressure or raised cholesterol. It is also important to stop smoking, eat healthily and take exercise.

Planning for the future

Discuss any worries you have with your doctor, mental health nurse or social worker. Charities such as the Alzheimer's Society are also a very useful source of advice. A mental health nurse can help you understand more about the illness. They can give advice about medication and other help available. Social services can help with home helps, meals at home or day care. You may be entitled to benefits. You may also wish to complete a Lasting Power of Attorney. This means that someone you trust can look after your affairs when you find that you can't do this yourself.