

DEMENTIA

What is dementia?

The term "dementia" is used to describe the symptoms that occur when the brain is affected by specific diseases and conditions. These include Alzheimer's disease and stroke.

Dementia is progressive, which means the symptoms will gradually get worse. How fast dementia progresses depends on the individual. Each person is unique and will experience dementia in their own way.

Symptoms of dementia include:

- Loss of memory – for example, forgetting the way home from the shops, or being unable to remember names and places
- Mood changes – particularly as parts of the brain that control emotion are affected by disease. People with dementia may also feel sad, frightened or angry about what is happening to them.
- Communication problems – a decline in the ability to talk, read and write.

In the later stages of dementia, the person affected will have problems carrying out everyday tasks and will become increasingly dependent on other people.

What causes dementia?

There are several diseases and conditions that cause dementia. These include:

Alzheimer's disease

This is the most common cause of dementia. During the course of the disease the chemistry and structure of the brain changes, leading to the death of brain cells.

Vascular disease

The brain relies on a network of vessels to bring it oxygen-bearing blood. If the oxygen supply to the brain fails, brain cells are likely to die and this can cause the symptoms of vascular dementia. These symptoms can occur either suddenly, following a stroke, or

over time through a series of small strokes.

Dementia with Lewy bodies

This form of dementia gets its name from tiny spherical structures that develop inside nerve cells. Their presence in the brain leads to degeneration of brain tissue. Memory, concentration and language skills are affected. This form of dementia shares some characteristics with Parkinson's disease.

Fronto-temporal dementia (including Pick's disease)

In fronto-temporal dementia, damage is usually focused in the front part of the brain. At first, personality and behaviour are more affected than memory.

Rarer causes of dementia

There are many other, rarer causes of dementia, including progressive supranuclear palsy, Korsakoff's syndrome, Binswanger's disease, HIV and Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease (CJD)

People with multiple sclerosis, motor neurone disease, Parkinson's disease and Huntington's disease may also be more likely to develop dementia.

Treatment

In most instances, there are no ways to cure the diseases that cause dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease. However, there are drugs available that may alleviate some of the symptoms; these can temporarily slow down the progression of symptoms in some people.

Complementary therapies

Public interest in complementary therapies is growing at a significant rate, easily outpacing the research conducted into their safety and effectiveness. People are often attracted to the "natural" and safe image of these therapies, particularly in treating chronic medical conditions, for which conventional treatments are often less than completely effective. There is little high-quality research into the treatment of dementia with complementary and alternative medicine. However, a number of therapies are providing some interesting preliminary results.

HELPING SOMEONE WITH MEMORY PROBLEMS

- Give background information to other people who are involved in the care of the person, this will make it easier for other people to see the person as a whole person rather than simply as someone with dementia.
- Dementia is nothing to be ashamed of. It is no one's fault.
- Dementia may cause the person to behave in ways that other people may find irritating or upsetting but this is not deliberate.
- A person with dementia may often remember the distant past more clearly than the recent past and the present. They are often happy to talk about their memories. But remember, past memories may be painful.
- Names are important. It is important to make sure that other people address the person with dementia in a way that they recognise and prefer.
- Some people may prefer younger people or those who do not know them formally to use courtesy titles such as "Mr" or "Mrs".
- Be kind and reassuring without talking down to the person as though they were a child.
- Never talk about the person with other people while the person is present. Always include them in conversation.
- Avoid scolding or criticising the person – this will make them feel small.
- All these things will attack the fragile sense of self-worth of the person.
- Look for the meaning behind the words, even if, on the surface, they do not seem to make much sense. The person is almost certainly trying to communicate with you about how they feel.
- Give them plenty of encouragement. Let them do things at their own pace and in their own way.
- Do things with the person, rather than for them, so that they

can preserve some independence.

- Break activities up into small steps so that they feel a sense of achievement, even if they can only manage a part of a task.
- Our self-respect is often bound up with the way we look. Encourage the person to take pride in their appearance and give them plenty of praise.
- Suggest that people always knock on their bedroom door before entering, for example: If the person needs help with intimate personal activities such as washing or using the toilet, this should be done in a sensitive way. Make sure the door of the bathroom or the toilet is kept closed if other people are around.

The information here on dementia has been compiled with grateful thanks to the Alzheimer society'. More detailed information can be downloaded from their web site web site, www.alzheimers.org.uk