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Guide to Dementia

This brief guide is to provide help with understanding the key aspects of dementia; what is it, the causes and the symptoms.

Dementia rates increasing

According to Alzheimer's Research UK, around 850,000 people in the UK have dementia. By 2025 this number is expected to rise to over one million, with a projected rise to over 2 million by 2050. Dementia is more common among women than men. 1 in 14 people over 65 years of age and 1 in 6 people over the age of 80 has dementia.

What is dementia?

It is a common misconception that dementia is a disease. The word dementia describes a group of symptoms that may include memory loss, difficulties with thought-processing, problem-solving or speech, and sometimes changes in mood or behaviour.

Dementia occurs when the brain is affected by a disease. It isn't a natural part of ageing, however, the chance of developing dementia increases significantly with age. There are more than 100 known causes of dementia. The most commonly known types are Alzheimer's and vascular dementia. Some people have a combination of these, known as mixed dementia.

Alzheimer's disease

Irregular material called 'plaques' and 'tangles' builds up inside the brain. This interrupts how nerve cells work and connect with each other; causing the affected nerve cells to eventually die. Alzheimer's disease also causes a reduction of some important chemicals in the brain that prevents messages from moving around the brain as efficiently as they should.

The early symptom of Alzheimer's disease is gradual, mild memory loss. People with Alzheimer's might also have difficulties with speech, such as being able to think of the correct word.

Vascular dementia

The word 'vascular' relates to blood vessels. Vascular dementia results from a blood supply shortage to the brain. Brain cells can die if they are deprived of enough blood. There are several different forms of vascular dementia. One type is caused by stroke (stroke-related dementia). Another is caused by a depleted blood supply to deep parts within the brain (subcortical vascular dementia).

When a blood clot blocks the flow of blood to part of the brain, or when a blood vessel bursts in the brain, it causes a stroke. Vascular dementia sometimes follows a large stroke. More commonly however, it follows a number of small strokes (called multi-infarct dementia).

Subcortical vascular dementia is due to poor blood flow to the deep parts of the brain. This is often owing to narrowing of the arteries that supply the brain. Early symptoms of vascular dementia in someone who has had a large stroke can begin suddenly. Over time, symptoms can remain stable or even improve slightly in the early stages.

Early on-set dementia

More than 40,000 younger people (under the age of 65) in the UK have dementia. This is called early-onset or young-onset dementia.

Why does it occur?

Dementia is caused by physical changes in the brain. The formation and chemistry of the brain changes as dementia progresses and this causes some brain cells to be damaged and die. This affects the way the brain sends messages; such as how to move, how to speak, and vision. The brain cells also store our memories and process our emotions. Damage to different parts of the brain effect different aspects of day-to-day life. Damage to one area of the brain might affect someone's ability to follow a recipe book, whilst brain cell deterioration to another part might affect short-term memory.

Uncertainty still remains around dementia and experts continue to research into why this happens to some brains and not others. Whilst there are no definitive answers yet, it is widely believed that dementia depends on a combination of age, genes, lifestyle and health.

Early symptoms of dementia

Dementia is widely known for affecting memory; however, there is more to dementia than memory loss. Dementia can deprive all the senses and can severely affect vision, hearing and touch. This in turn can create confusion, frustration, anxiety and fear.

The 5 most common symptoms of dementia are:

- Memory
- Struggling to remember things that happened recently
- Repeating themselves
- Problem-solving
- Difficulty in working things out
- Issues with concentration
- Struggling with regular daily tasks, such as using a credit card
- Difficulty with grasping new skills
- Communication
- Difficulty finding the right word
- Struggling with following conversation
- Misinterpreting things
- Disorientation
- Confusion about time or place
- Feeling disorientated in places they know well
- Losing track of the time, or date
- Adapting
- Struggling to adapt to physical and sensory changes
- Mood changes
- Difficulties controlling emotions – becoming uncharacteristically sad, frightened or angry
- Seeming withdrawn and lacking self-confidence

No two people are the same

Everyone is different and therefore, the symptoms of dementia increase gradually over time at varying rates. Although there is no cure currently, there are medical treatments that can help to slow down the symptoms of dementia and help those living with the condition to cope more easily. People with dementia can still continue to thrive and enjoy life. They can receive financial help; make adjustments in their own home to adapt to their changing needs; or seek healthcare and support from care professionals.

Dementia is not a natural stage of ageing, it just occurs more commonly in the elderly. In fact, the vast majority of elderly in the UK aged over 80 years old are vibrant and attentive, if perhaps a little forgetful now and again. Two-thirds of those living with dementia continue to live in the community. If, however, if a decline in health results in the decision that more personalised care is needed, there are care homes that specialise in caring for people with this condition.

Useful contacts

Alzheimer's Society

www.alzheimers.org.uk

National Dementia Helpline

0300 222 1122

Dementia UK

www.dementiauk.org

Age UK

www.ageuk.org.uk

Dementia Friends

www.dementiafriends.org.uk