

Diagnosing dementia

ABOUT DEMENTIA

This Help Sheet provides information about the early signs of dementia and the ways in which it is diagnosed. The importance of an early and correct diagnosis is emphasised.

What are the early signs of dementia?

The early signs of dementia are very subtle and vague, and may not be immediately obvious. Early symptoms may also vary a great deal. Usually though, people first seem to notice that there is a problem with memory, particularly in remembering recent events.

Other common symptoms include:

- Confusion
- Personality change
- Apathy and withdrawal
- Loss of ability to do everyday tasks

Sometimes people fail to recognise that these symptoms indicate that something is wrong. They may mistakenly assume that such behaviour is a normal part of the ageing process. Or symptoms may develop gradually and go unnoticed for a long time. Sometimes people may refuse to act even when they know something is wrong.

Warning Signs

This is a checklist of common symptoms of dementia. Go through the list and tick symptoms that are present. If there are several ticks, consult a doctor for a complete examination.

Memory loss that affects day-to-day function

It's normal to occasionally forget appointments or a friend's phone number and remember them later. A person with dementia may forget things more often or not remember them at all.

Difficulty performing familiar tasks

People can get distracted from time to time and they may forget to serve part of the meal. A person with dementia may have

trouble with all the steps involved in preparing a meal.

Confusion about time and place

It's normal to forget the day of the week – for a moment. A person with dementia may have difficulty finding their way to a familiar place, or feel confused about where they are.

Problems with language

Everyone has trouble finding the right word sometimes, but a person with dementia may forget simple words or substitute inappropriate words, making sentences difficult to understand.

Problems with abstract thinking

Balancing a cheque book can be difficult for anyone, but a person with dementia may have trouble knowing what the numbers mean.

Poor or decreased judgement

A person with dementia may have difficulty judging distance or direction when driving a car.

Problems misplacing things

Anyone can temporarily misplace a wallet or keys. A person with dementia may put things in inappropriate places.

Changes in personality or behaviour

Everyone becomes sad or moody from time to time. Someone with dementia can exhibit rapid mood swings for no apparent reason. They can become confused, suspicious or withdrawn.

A loss of initiative

It's normal to tire of some activities. However dementia may cause a person to lose interest in previously enjoyed activities.

Based on information from Alzheimer's Association USA

Remember

Remember that many conditions have symptoms similar to dementia, so do not assume that someone has dementia just because some of the symptoms are present. Strokes, depression, alcoholism, infections, hormone disorders, nutritional deficiencies and brain tumours can all cause dementia-like symptoms. Many of these conditions can be treated.

A correct diagnosis is important

Consulting a doctor at an early stage is critical. Only a medical practitioner can diagnose dementia.

A complete medical and psychological assessment may identify a treatable condition and ensure that it is treated correctly, or confirm the presence of dementia.

An assessment may include the following:

- A detailed medical history, provided, if possible, by the person with the symptoms as well as a close relative or friend. This helps to establish whether there has been a slow or a sudden onset of symptoms and their progression
- A thorough physical and neurological examination, including tests of the senses and movement function to rule out other conditions, and to identify any medical conditions which may worsen the confusion associated with dementia
- Laboratory tests, including a variety of blood and urine tests to identify any possible illness which could be responsible for the symptoms
- Neuropsychological testing to identify retained abilities and specific problem areas such as comprehensions, insight and judgment
- Other specialised tests such as chest x-ray, ECG or CT scan
- A mental status test to check the range of intellectual functions such as memory, the ability to read, write and calculate which may be affected by dementia
- Psychiatric assessment to identify treatable disorders such as depression which can mimic dementia, and to manage any psychiatric symptoms such as anxiety or delusions which may occur alongside dementia

Where to begin

The best place to start the diagnostic process is with the doctor who, after considering the symptoms and ordering screening tests, may offer a preliminary diagnosis or refer the person to a medical specialist such as a neurologist, geriatrician or psychiatrist.

Some people may be resistant to the idea of visiting a doctor. Sometimes people do not realise, or deny, that there is anything wrong with them. This can be due to the brain changes of dementia that interfere with the ability to recognise or appreciate one's memory problems. Others, with retained insight, may be afraid of having their fears confirmed.

One of the most effective ways to overcome this problem is to find another reason to visit the doctor. Perhaps suggest an examination of the heart, a blood pressure check or a review of long-term medication. Another way is to suggest that it is time for both of you to have a physical check up. Be sure to provide a lot of reassurance. A calm, caring attitude at this time can help overcome the person's worries and fears.

If the person still will not visit the doctor:

- Talk with other families and carers who may have had to deal with similar situations
- Contact the Aged Care Assessment Team (ACAT)
- Call the National Dementia Helpline

Further Information

Alzheimer's Australia offers support, information, education and counselling. Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**.

For further information and to view other Help Sheets visit our web site at www.alzheimers.org.au