

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT DEMENTIA

In the Clinic
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What Is Dementia?

Dementia is a decline in mental function that interferes with daily life. Alzheimer disease and vascular dementia are 2 common types. Dementia can begin at any age but commonly develops later in life. Symptoms usually start slowly and worsen over time.

What Are the Symptoms of Dementia?

Many dementia symptoms occur in normal individuals, so it is difficult to know when to pay attention to a symptom. You should be concerned if a symptom causes more difficulty, worsens with time, and is accompanied by other symptoms. You may first notice symptoms when there is a life change, such as a spouse's death or a hospitalization. Symptoms include:

- Forgetfulness that may cause the person to lose objects
- Not remembering conversations
- Trouble finding the right words
- Difficulty with familiar activities, like cooking or making a phone call
- Feeling disoriented while walking or driving
- Changes in personality, such as becoming confused, suspicious, or fearful

Can I Prevent Dementia?

Some lifestyles may prevent a future decline in mental function, including:

- Staying physically active
- Eating a healthy diet
- Participating in social events
- Doing activities that occupy the mind, like puzzles or hobbies
- Quitting smoking
- Controlling blood pressure, blood sugar, and cholesterol

How Is Dementia Diagnosed?

If you suspect that you or someone you know has dementia, a health care provider can help. They will ask about symptoms, take a medical history, and conduct a physical examination. They may want to speak with someone who knows the person well. The provider will evaluate mental status, speech, and mood and administer screening tests that assess memory and language.

There is no specific test for dementia, but laboratory tests or brain imaging may be necessary to rule out other conditions that cause similar symptoms.

How Is Dementia Treated?

Treatment focuses on controlling symptoms and avoiding harm. Regular checkups maximize function and well-being. These include hearing and vision checks, deciding whether to stop medicines that might worsen symptoms, and ensuring that vaccinations are up-to-date and chronic diseases are controlled. Checkups also monitor for anxiety, depression, agitation, sleep disturbances, and hallucinations.



People with dementia should have a calm and predictable environment. They should get enough rest, eat well, brush their teeth, and stay clean. Patients and caregivers should discuss the patient's values and wishes soon after the diagnosis because progression of symptoms will make later discussions more difficult. It is also important to plan how care will change as symptoms progress. The provider can help by arranging a home safety assessment to evaluate whether the patient is able to safely cook, keep track of medicines, and do other activities independently. They can also arrange a driving assessment to determine if it is safe for the patient to continue driving.

Newer medicines are available for dementia, but they are only mildly effective and have side effects. Talk with a provider about what is best for your situation.

For Caregivers

Caregivers play an important role for people with dementia. The provider will talk more with the caregiver and less with the patient as symptoms progress and patients become less able to function independently. Eventually, it may be necessary to discuss whether the patient should go to an assisted living facility or a nursing home.

Many caregivers experience guilt, anger, loneliness, and depression. If you feel tired, sad, or stressed, talk with your provider, who can help you stay healthy, identify whether additional assistance is available, and connect you with support groups.

Questions for My Doctor

- How do I know whether my memory loss is dementia?
- How can I manage my symptoms?
- Will medicine help me? Does it have side effects?
- How can I make sure my wishes for future care are recognized and followed?
- Will I need to go to an assisted living facility or a nursing home?
- Are there things I should start or stop doing now?
- Do I need to see a specialist?
- Are there support groups for me and my caregivers?

For More Information



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Alzheimer's Association

www.alz.org/alzheimers-dementia/what-is-dementia
www.alz.org/alzheimer-dementia/que-es-la-demencia

National Institute on Aging

www.nia.nih.gov/health/what-dementia-symptoms-types-and-diagnosis

Family Caregiver Alliance

www.caregiver.org