

What is dementia?

We all forget things as we get older. Many older people have a slight loss of memory that does not affect their daily lives. But memory loss that gets worse may mean that you have dementia.

Dementia is a loss of mental skills that affects your daily life. It can cause problems with memory, problem-solving and learning. It also can cause problems with thinking and planning.

Dementia usually gets worse over time. But how quickly it gets worse is different for each person. Changes can happen over a long period of time, from months to years.

Your chances of having dementia rise as you get older. But this doesn't mean that everyone will get it.

How is dementia diagnosed?

To diagnose dementia, your doctor will:

- Do a physical examination.
- Ask questions about recent and past illnesses and life events. The doctor will want to talk to a close family member to check details.
- Ask you to do some simple things that test your memory and other mental skills. Your doctor may ask you to tell what day and year it is, repeat a series of words, or draw a clock face.

The doctor may do tests to look for a cause that can be treated. For example, you might have blood tests to check your thyroid or to look for an infection. You might also have a test that shows a picture of your brain, like an MRI or a CT scan. These tests can help your doctor find a tumour or brain injury.

Knowing the type of dementia a person has can help the doctor prescribe medicines or other treatments.

What are the symptoms?

Usually the first symptom of dementia is memory loss. Often the person who has the memory problem doesn't notice it, but family and friends do.

People who have dementia may have increasing trouble with:

- Recalling recent events. They may forget appointments or lose objects.

- Recognizing people and places.
- Keeping up with conversations and activity.
- Finding their way around familiar places, or driving to and from places they know well.
- Keeping up personal care such as grooming or bathing.
- Planning and carrying out routine tasks. They may have trouble following a recipe or writing a letter or email.

How is dementia treated?

Medicines for dementia can slow it down for a while and make it easier to live with. Medicines can't cure it, but they may help improve mental function, mood, or behaviour.

If a stroke caused the dementia, doing things to reduce the chance of another stroke may help. They include eating healthy foods, being active, staying at a healthy weight and not smoking.

As dementia gets worse, a person may get depressed or angry and upset. An active social life, counselling and, sometimes, medicine may help with changing emotions.

The goals of ongoing treatment are to keep the person safely at home as long as possible and to provide support and guidance to the caregivers.

The person will need routine follow-up visits. The doctor will monitor medicines and the person's level of functioning.

Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety. Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor or nurse call line if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

For 24/7 nurse advice and general health information call Health Link at 811.

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