

## Dementia

Dementia is a term which describes several conditions that cause damage to brain cells. **Alzheimer's disease** is the most common cause of dementia

Different types of dementia can lead to different experiences and problems for the person with dementia and their loved ones. Not every person will experience all the symptoms and the problems linked to their type of dementia.

### Types of Dementia:

#### **Alzheimer's disease**

**Alzheimer's disease** is the most common and well-known cause of dementia. It is thought to cause over half of all cases. It is recognised by the build-up of protein on the brain which forms plaques and tangles that stop the brain working as it should.

In general, with Alzheimer's disease changes are gradual over time and the illness may last several years. At first, changes may be slight and as the illness goes on, the changes become greater.

Memory loss is often one of the first symptoms of this disease; however, there are a range of early signs and symptoms including getting stuck for words, misplacing things regularly, losing track of time, changes in mood and behaviour and difficulty in finding the way, even in familiar places.

**“One of the first things I noticed, apart from her memory, was her ability to coordinate daily tasks was deteriorating. When she cooked a meal, she might cook the vegetables first and it could be hours afterwards that she would put the meat on” Anonymous, Galway.**

## Vascular dementia

**Vascular dementia** is the second most common type of dementia and it occurs when the blood supply to the brain is damaged. There are two main types of vascular dementia; one caused by stroke and the other by small vessel disease.

## Other forms of dementia

Other forms of dementia include **alcohol-related dementia** such as **Korsakoff's Syndrome** and **Creutzfeldt-Jacob Dementia**. Some people with Down's syndrome can develop dementia in middle age.

## Understanding early signs

The early signs and symptoms of dementia may vary from person to person, and each type of dementia can have specific symptoms or characteristics linked to it.

## Early Stage

In the early stages, dementia changes are slight, and it is possible to continue to do lots of things. Early stage typically means they may:

- forget things easily repeat things frequently.
- experience problems with language, such as appearing to be stuck for words or losing track of a conversation,
- find new situations or places confusing.
- show poor judgement or find it hard to make decisions
- lose interest in other people or activities
- be unwilling to try new things
- experience low mood, may become anxious or withdrawn
- feel frustrated or angry

Many people in the early stages of dementia engage in activities they enjoy but at times they may find it hard and may need to rest more frequently.

## **Middle Stage**

As dementia progresses, changes are greater, and a person will need more support to help them to manage day to day living. As a person finds it harder to do things, they may lose confidence and withdraw or be upset. Others may feel frustrated and angry and be argumentative or quick to lose their temper.

During the middle stage a person may:

- forget recent events completely
- conversations, television or reading are difficult to follow & confusing
- get lost easily, even in familiar places
- find bathing and dressing difficult or confusing
- need reminders to eat drink and take medication
- find meal preparation and managing money very difficult
- believe things are real even when they are not
- feel restless or agitated
- confuse time and experience difficulties with sleeping

The symptoms and behaviours that can occur are difficult for both the person with dementia and their families. There are supports and services to help and strategies for coping.

## **Later Stage**

During the late stage, increasing amounts of support is needed and they will become dependent on others for nursing care. They can become increasingly frail and may walk unsteadily, they may need a wheelchair or be confined to bed. During this stage the ability to fight even simple infections is low.

Typically, a person may:

- have difficulty recognising people
- experience gradual loss of speech
- have difficulty eating and sometimes swallowing

- experience incontinence
- appear restless and seem to be looking for someone or something

While a person with late stage dementia may have difficulty communicating, they will often respond positively to affection, a smile, and a soothing voice, music, scent and hand massages.

### The progression of Alzheimer's disease

On average people live eight to ten years from the time first symptoms emerge. However, it varies considerably depending on how old a person is when symptoms begin. Life expectancy is also affected by other illnesses the person experiences.

### The progression of vascular dementia

Vascular dementia is generally caused by stroke or a series of small strokes. Symptoms may appear to suddenly worsen due to a stroke and then remain level for a period of time and symptoms can emerge in a more gradual way. People with vascular dementia tend to maintain their personality and emotional responsiveness until the later stages of the condition. This can mean that people are more aware of their condition and can be more prone to depression than people with Alzheimer's disease.

In general people with vascular dementia live for around five years after symptoms begin. In many cases, the person's death will be caused by another stroke or heart attack.

### Final note

Each person's experience with their dementia is unique to them, and there is no way to say exactly how their dementia will progress, which symptoms will emerge and when and how long they may live with their condition.

Resources:

