



## Dementia

Dementia includes a wide range of symptoms that affect memory, thinking, behaviour and the ability to perform everyday activities.

Dementia is not a “one size fits all” disorder and symptoms can differ between individuals.

Different types including Alzheimer’s Disease, Vascular Dementia, Dementia with Lewy Bodies, Frontotemporal Dementia and Mixed Dementia are covered by the umbrella term “dementia”.

Dementia is not normal aging. Normal aging causes a reduction in cognitive abilities. Cognitive abilities allow an individual to perform various mental activities. When the decline in cognitive abilities affects the ability to perform everyday activities, it can be a sign of dementia.

### Symptoms

Dementia can affect these functions:

- Memory
- Thinking
- Judgment
- Learning capacity
- Language
- Difficulty with orientation
- Comprehension

The early signs of dementia are very subtle and may not be immediately obvious. The ten warning signs are:

- Memory loss that affects day-to-day activities
- Challenges with performing familiar tasks
- Confusion about time and place
- Challenges with language
- Challenges with abstract thinking
- Misplacing items
- Changes in mood or behaviour
- Changes in judgment
- Loss of initiative
- Changes to personality

### Causes

Dementia comes from neurodegenerative and progressive diseases. A neurodegenerative disease attacks the neurons which are the building blocks of the brain. This damages the brain and leads to the symptoms of dementia. Dementia is also progressive, which means symptoms will gradually worsen over time. New symptoms appear as the disease spreads in the brain.

A significant portion of brain health is related to cardiovascular health. The brain needs a lot of oxygen and must consume a lot of nutrients to properly function. Cardiovascular health leads to better brain fueling.



## Diagnostic

The diagnosis of dementia requires careful evaluation to rule out other possible causes. It is important to correctly diagnose the type of dementia because some medications may be beneficial to one type but have adverse reactions for another. A correct diagnosis allows for access to treatment and planning for the future.

No single test can detect dementia. Rather, experts use a combination of tests to rule out other possibilities. Generally, the assessment starts with the family physician followed by a referral to a specialist.

Tests of mental abilities and brain scans play an important role in making a diagnosis. Tests of mental abilities are a way of clinically observing symptoms and their seriousness. Brain scans can show damage in specific areas of the brain.

## Heredity

In all types of dementia, very few cases are hereditary. Indeed, in the vast majority of cases a combination of risk factors, rather than a familial link, increases the predisposition of a person to develop dementia.

We can act on some risk factors such as smoking, obesity and lack of physical activity. For this reason, the scientific and medical communities have put an emphasis in recent years on identifying risk factors and building prevention strategies.

## Things to remember:

- Symptoms can differ from one individual to another.
- A correct diagnosis can take time, but this allows for access to treatment and future planning.
- Research and clinical trials are underway to identify new treatments for dementia. Until then, we know we can improve quality of life by addressing modifiable risk factors.
- Contact the Dementia Society. No One Should Face Dementia Alone™

## References

Ismail, Zahinoor, et al. (2016). Alzheimer's & Dementia 12.2: 195-202.

Galvin JE, Sadowsky CH; NINCDS-ADRDA. (2012) J Am Board Fam Med. 25(3):367-382.