



## Young Onset Dementia

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

Dementia occurs rarely in young people. When dementia symptoms occur in people before the age of 65, it is called Young Onset Dementia. Since the occurrence is rarer it can be surprising and, therefore, difficult to diagnose.

The needs of a person with Young Onset Dementia can be very different due to the younger age. The person may be actively working and providing financially for a family, actively raising a family and be otherwise healthy and strong.

The brain is a person's "headquarters". Young Onset Dementia damages the brain. This brain damage leads to symptoms which fall into the general category we describe as "dementia". Dementia is progressive which means symptoms will gradually worsen. New symptoms appear as the disease spreads in the brain and damages new regions.

### Symptoms

Young Onset Dementia is more often clinically observed as changes in personality and behaviour and, less often, as memory loss. For this reason, the input of family and friends on the changes experienced by a person is particularly important in diagnosing this type of dementia. The first "symptom" observed by family and friends is often that the person did not seem "quite themselves". A person may struggle or make mistakes in daily tasks or at work even though they have not significantly changed.

It can be harder to accept a diagnosis of Young Onset Dementia because it is often completely unexpected. In addition, this type of disease feels like it is appearing too early in a person's life. This type of dementia greatly affects future plans (for example: retirement, raising children, having grandchildren, or traveling). Many factors can contribute to a feeling of grief, loss and anger when receiving such a diagnosis. When working is no longer a possibility, this loss of income can be a major source of stress for the family. It can also affect the self-esteem of a person with Young Onset Dementia and create a sense of loss of purpose.

### Causes

Many diseases can cause Young Onset Dementia including: Alzheimer's Disease, Vascular Dementia, Frontotemporal Dementia, Dementia with Lewy bodies, Traumatic Brain Injury, alcohol-related brain damage, Huntington's Disease, Parkinson's Disease, Dementia, Mixed Dementia, Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease and Down Syndrome.

About a third of people diagnosed with Young Onset Dementia have Alzheimer's Disease. It is referred to as Young Onset Alzheimer's Disease, not to be confused with the early stage of Alzheimer's Disease. In Young Onset Alzheimer's Disease, the symptoms appear before the age of 65. Conversely, the early stage of Alzheimer's Disease refers to the first symptoms experienced by a person with Alzheimer's Disease regardless of their age.

The other two most common types of Young Onset Dementia are Young Onset Vascular Dementia and Young Onset Frontotemporal Dementia.



## Diagnostic

Unfortunately, the diagnostic process often takes longer for a younger person. The lack of awareness that dementia can affect younger people can lead to a misdiagnosis of depression, anxiety or stress.

The diagnosis of Young Onset 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 future planning.

No single test can detect Young Onset Dementia. Rather, experts use a combination of tests to rule out other possibilities.

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

Young Onset Dementia is more often associated with a familial (genetic) link. A gene is something that can be transferred from parent to offspring. However, the majority of Young Onset Dementia cases are sporadic, and, therefore, not hereditary.

## Things to remember:

- The exact symptoms experienced by a person can be different from one individual to another.
- Since the occurrence is rarer, it can be surprising and, therefore, difficult to diagnose.
- The needs of a person with Young Onset Dementia can be very different from the other types of dementia.
- Establishing the 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

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