



Dementias

Dementia is an umbrella term for a range of neurological conditions that affect brain function. This includes learning, memory, problem solving, behaviors, and language.



SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

Symptoms of most forms of dementia usually appear slowly over time. However, with a certain form, vascular dementia, the onset of symptoms can be sudden. Symptoms of dementia include:

- Memory loss
- Problems recognizing family and friends
- Getting lost in familiar settings
- Not being able to finish tasks
- Repeating questions
- Social withdrawal or depression
- General confusion
- Impulsive behavior
- No interest in personal hygiene
- Unclear speech

CAUSES

- Alzheimer's disease. The most common type of dementia.
- Vascular dementia. This is often due to a series of small strokes.
- Parkinson's disease
- Pick's disease. This is like Alzheimer's disease, but has different changes in the brain.
- Huntington's disease. This is an inherited disease. Facial tics and other uncontrolled movements also occur.
- Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease. This is caused by a virus that lies dormant in the body for years. When the virus is activated, the dementia progresses quickly.
- Multiple sclerosis. Dementia with multiple sclerosis is rare, though, and may occur with the end stage of this disease.

Secondary dementias result from other conditions, such as:

- Depression
- Alcohol problems
- Reactions to certain medicines
- Poor nutrition. Lack of vitamin B12.
- Hypothyroidism
- Dehydration
- Head injuries
- Infections such as HIV, which causes AIDS, or syphilis
- Brain tumors

{Note: Research found that older Veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are at increased risk for dementia compared to their peers who do not have PTSD.}



DELIRIUM

Delirium is mental confusion, behavior changes, etc. that develop in a matter of hours to a day or so. Delirium can be caused by dementia but may also be a symptom of another condition, such as:

- A high fever
- Pneumonia or other infection
- Diabetes
- Substance abuse or withdrawal
- Misuse or withdrawal of certain medicines
- Dehydration and electrolyte imbalances
- Advanced cancer

Immediate medical care is needed for delirium so the cause can be found and treated.



TREATMENT

Dementias need medical diagnosis and treatment. When another condition, such as depression, is the cause and is treated with success, the dementia can be cured. For others, such as Alzheimer's disease, there is no cure. The goal is to treat symptoms and provide safety and comfort.



SELF-CARE

The person with dementia needs to:

- Follow a simple daily routine.
- Keep up with hobbies and interests.
- Take breaks each day.
- Wear an ID tag.
- Use notes posted throughout the house as reminders, including having labels put on objects.
- Be kept in a safe environment.
- Eat a well balanced diet and drink plenty of fluids.
- Have regular sensory stimulation, like touching, exercising, etc.

Caretakers should:

- Assume a non-combative approach to difficult behaviors. Steer the person into another activity.
- Give medicines as advised by the person's doctor and report and review medicines with the doctor and/or pharmacist.
- Get home care, respite care, hospital, or nursing home care, if needed.
- Take care of yourself, too. Take breaks, join a support group, and exercise when you can.



CONTACT DOCTOR WHEN:

- You are unable to care for someone with dementia or they are too agitated or hostile to control
- A medical evaluation is needed for a person with symptoms of dementia

GET IMMEDIATE CARE WHEN:

Any stroke warning signs:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm, or leg, especially on one side of the body
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- Sudden trouble seeing in 1 or both eyes
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause