



Dementia



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What is Dementia ?

Dementia is a brain disease, involving a rapid degeneration of brain cells. It is not a natural ageing process. People with dementia become progressively forgetful with intellectual deterioration and may experience personality changes.

Most people with dementia are over age 65. The prevalence rises with increasing age. Statistically, one out of every ten people aged above 65 has dementia.

What are the causes of dementia ?

1. Alzheimer's disease

It is the most common type of dementia. It is a progressive and degenerative disease of the brain in which brain cells die and are not replaced. It results in impaired memory, thinking and behavior. The causes of Alzheimer's disease are still unknown. However, drug treatments are available to improve the deterioration process of the disease.

2. Vascular dementia

It is a step-wise deterioration of brain functions when blood vessels are damaged by minor strokes or other vascular diseases.

3. Other causes of dementias

Mainly include depression, malnutrition, drug and alcohol abuse, and diseases of the thyroid. These causes of dementia can be alleviated with treatments. Moreover, dementia can be caused by other medical conditions including Parkinson's disease and HIV.

What should I do if I have noticed the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease?

If you have found family members or friends having the following symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, they should have an initial screening by a family physician. Further referral to a specialist (including Psychogeriatrician or Geriatrician) for detailed examination should be made accordingly.

The 10 warning signs of Alzheimer's disease :

1. Recent memory loss that affects job skills	2. Difficulty performing familiar tasks
3. Problems with language	4. Disorientation of time and place
5. Poor or decreased judgment	6. Problems with abstract thinking
7. Misplacing things	8. Changes in mood or behavior
9. Changes in personality	10. Loss of initiative

Courses of development of Alzheimer's disease :

People with Alzheimer's disease would show multiple deteriorations in their cognitive functioning, especially short term memory, that their activities of daily living and behaviors, as well as social functioning would be significantly affected. There are individual differences with regard to these impairments and disturbances. Nevertheless, there are 3 stages in the course of development of the Alzheimer's disease.

1. Mild stage (up to 3 years)

Most people at this stage have problems in short term memory, having trouble remembering appointments, things that happened and spoken recently. Moreover, they may have problems of losing or misplacing items and getting lost at street. Other symptoms include delusional features, difficulty in concentration, lack of initiatives and loss of interest. Nevertheless, people in this stage can still manage many of their daily activities themselves.

2. Moderate Stage (up to 3 years)

People in this stage have further deteriorations in memory and show disorientations to person, time and place. They would have problems of slow responses and troubles in logical thinking, learning new knowledge and skills, language and mood (e.g. getting suspicious, angry and upset easily). Some may have psychotic features of hallucination and delusion. People in this stage may have more trouble taking care of themselves and need help for activities of daily living.

3. Severe stage (3 to 5 years)

People in this stage show severe memory impairment. They have trouble recognizing family members as well as expressing oneself and understanding others. They will be deteriorated physically and having difficulties in mobility, even with bowel and bladder incontinence. They may need long term care in everyday life.

Tips for taking care of people with dementia

1. Environment

Create personalized external memory aids, such as message boards, calendar, handy lists and instruction sheets. Make sure they are placed in a prominent place and establish a habit of using it. Make a list of the day's activities and put it in a place where it can be easily found. Encourage the person with dementia to refer to it often and to tick off each activity as it is completed.

Keep familiar objects in their usual places, where they can be easily found.

Provide adequate lighting, especially at night. For example, place a small lamp next to the bed to provide security and reduce the risk of fall.

2. Everyday care

Encourage to remain independent for as long as possible in order to maintain their self-respect.

Design a simple, tailor-made and regular routine to help prompting the person into remembering what they are meant to be doing, bringing order and structure to confused daily life.

Provide more time for adjustment when there is a change of routine or social activities. Prompting before the changes would make them feel more secured.

Don't offer too many choices, as this may confuse and upset them.

3. Others

Plan adequate activities to maintain a sense of dignity and self-worth by giving purpose and meaning to life, as well as maintaining their existing physical and mental capabilities.

Encourage to have their social life by, for example, inviting friends and relatives around. Avoid large gatherings as these may be difficult for the person to cope with.

A person may gain satisfaction from using skills related to a previous occupation or hobby, for example, gardening or house-keeping. However, don't push too hard if they refused. You can try again later. As the disease progresses, it will be harder to keep both the person's mind and body active. Moreover, his or her likes, dislikes and abilities may change over time. This will require you, the caregiver, to be observant and flexible in planning activities.

