

# DEMENTIA



**World Health  
Organization**

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE **Eastern Mediterranean**

## What is dementia?

Dementia is a syndrome (a group of related symptoms), not a specific disease. Dementia describes a gradual decline in memory, thinking and social abilities that is severe enough to interfere with daily functioning.

The main feature of dementia is memory loss, but not every memory loss is dementia. Dementia is progressive which means it gets worse over time.

Sometimes you may notice changes in behaviour or emotion (e.g. agitation or depression) in an affected person even before you see memory problems. However, their consciousness stays intact.

Dementia is one of the major causes of disability and dependency among older people. It is overwhelming for the people affected, their families and society at large.

Although it mainly affects older people, it is not a normal part of ageing.

Worldwide, around 50 million people have dementia. There are 10 million new cases every year.

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia, accounting for about 60–70% of all cases.

## Common signs and symptoms of dementia

Dementia symptoms vary depending on the cause, but common signs and symptoms can be grouped as either changes in memory and mental abilities or psychological changes (changes in emotions).

- Changes in memory and mental abilities include memory loss/forgetfulness (such as remembering past events much more easily than recent ones), issues with problem-solving or reasoning, finding it hard to follow conversations or TV programmes, difficulty communicating or finding words, and difficulty planning, organizing or handling complex tasks.

- Psychological changes include feeling anxious, depressed or angry about memory loss, feeling confused even in a familiar environment, personality changes and inappropriate behaviour, and being apathetic or uninterested in other people's emotions.
- Someone with dementia will become more dependent on others to help them as the illness progresses.

## What causes dementia?

People often mix up Alzheimer's disease with dementia. Alzheimer's is the most common cause of dementia, but dementia can happen due to other diseases such as brain strokes, infections or immune diseases, and severe deficiencies in vitamins or minerals. For whatever reason, there is damage to brain cells that causes the symptoms. The way dementia progresses depends on the area of the brain affected.

Important factors that increase the risk of dementia are untreated hypertension, an unhealthy diet and obesity, lack of exercise, excessive alcohol use and diabetes. You can decrease your risk by leading a healthy life style and getting help to control conditions like diabetes or hypertension.

## When to seek help

If you experience problems with your memory, get an appointment and see a doctor. You could see a general practitioner, a psychiatrist or a neurologist. It is important to get an early diagnosis for dementia because with treatment the progress can be slowed down and the patient can enjoy more years of independent life. Whichever doctor you see first may well refer you to other specialists for a complete assessment.

The doctor will do a medical interview and request a brain CT scan or MRI, some laboratory tests and psychological tests. These can all help to understand the cause of dementia and choose the best ways for the person affected to live healthier.

Some people with dementia do not recognise that they have a problem or underestimate the problem. If you are a family member, friend or care giver, you need to pay careful attention to changes in the memory, emotions and functions of elderly people – do not just assume that they are part of the normal aging process.

## Treating dementia

There is no treatment currently available to cure dementia or alter/reverse its progression.

However, a lot of treatment can be offered to support and improve the lives of people with dementia and their carers and families. Your doctor may suggest medicines for temporary control of symptoms, for treating psychological problems such as depression or anxiety, and also for controlling medical conditions.

They may refer patients to memory clinics which can support them with interventions that keep their memory and mental functions more active for longer.

It may be common in your local community to get herbal or over-the-counter remedies for different conditions. No alternative treatment is known to be effective in dementia. Before you take any medicine or make any serious change in your diet, consult your doctor.

## How can you help yourself if you are diagnosed with dementia?

- Learn as much as you can about memory loss, dementia and Alzheimer's disease.
- Keep a journal. Write down everyday tasks and appointments to help you remember important things.
- Keep your mind active by reading and doing mind exercises like crossword puzzles and Sudoku puzzles.
- Spend time with friends and family members.
- Stay physically active as much as you can, eat healthily, stop smoking and drinking alcohol, and get regular check-ups with your doctor.

- Plan ahead of time. A time may come when you find it difficult to make important decisions about yourself or your finances. Settle issues beforehand and, if possible, give the right to someone trusted or a solicitor to make decisions on your behalf once you are unable to do so.
- Keep your ID with your address and emergency contacts on it when leaving the house.
- Ask for help from people around you. Friends and family are crucial in helping you adapt to the changes in your life and maintain your confidence and independence.
- Talk to a member of your spiritual community or another person who can help you with your spiritual needs.
- Join a local support group or an online community of people who are having similar experiences.
- Find new ways to express yourself, such as through painting, singing or writing.

## How can you help a friend or family member who has dementia?

Supporting a person who has dementia can be challenging. They can need a lot of care, and you may feel overwhelmed by the responsibility. You may find these practical tips useful:

- **Use simple and clear language to communicate.** When talking with your loved one, keep eye contact, speak slowly and clearly in simple short sentences, be patient about receiving an answer, and use gestures and cues such as pointing to objects.
- **Encourage exercise.** Encourage them to be physically active as much as possible.
- **Encourage leisure activity.** Do fun and enjoyable things together: dancing, painting, gardening, cooking, singing and spiritual activities – anything they feel good doing.

- **Establish a nighttime ritual.** Behaviour is often worse at night. Try to establish a calming sleep ritual away from the noise of television or any exciting activity. Leave nightlights on in the bedroom, hall and bathroom to prevent disorientation. Avoid tea or coffee in the evening.
  - **Encourage them to keep a calendar.** A calendar may help your loved one remember upcoming events, daily activities and their medication schedule.
  - **Modify the environment.** Reducing clutter and noise can make it easier for someone with dementia to focus and function. Help organize their home in a way that helps them accomplish everyday tasks, for example investing in a pill box that makes it easier to remember what medications to take.
  - **Plan for the future.** Develop a plan with your loved one while they are able to make decisions for the future, especially to settle financial and legal issues. If necessary, get help from a legal adviser.
- **Watch out for abuse and violation of their rights.** People with dementia are vulnerable to abuse and violation of their rights because of their diminished ability to make decisions and take care of themselves. You need to be vigilant for any harm they may suffer from anyone around.
  - **Take care of yourself.** Beware of symptoms of burnout and frustration while looking after someone with dementia. You need to take care of yourself, keep your spirits and strength up and ask for help if you feel worn out.

*This is one of a series of factsheets produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) to give the general public more information about mental disorders and how they can be treated. You can download all the factsheets free of charge from the WHO website at: [www.emro.who.int/mnh](http://www.emro.who.int/mnh).*