

Types of Dementia

Dementia is a loss of thinking, remembering, language, judgment, and reasoning skills that are severe enough to affect daily activities such as eating, bathing, and getting dressed. People with dementia may have a change in their personality, find it hard to control emotions, or lose their ability to solve problems. Although it is normal to need more time to remember things as we age, other thinking and reasoning skills should not change. Dementia is not a normal part of the aging process.

There are different causes of dementia. Some can be treated, and some cannot. That is why it is important to have a medical exam to learn the cause of the changes.

Common Causes of Dementia

Alzheimer's Disease (AD)

- Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia. The symptoms start slowly and become worse over time.
- Damage to the brain may begin 10 or more years before symptoms appear. During this first stage, abnormal clumps of proteins called "amyloid plaques" and tangled bundles of fibers called "neurofibrillary tangles" are formed. Nerve cells in the brain can no longer connect with each another and stop working as they should.
- During the second stage, these symptoms occur: memory loss, confusion about time and space, poor decision making, and changes to language. The damage that occurred during the first stage are now causing the nerve cells to die and brain tissue to shrink. The part of the brain called the hippocampus, where memories are formed, is affected.
- The final stage is known as Alzheimer's dementia. The person loses their ability to communicate, and they will need total care.

As with all kinds of dementia, the disease will progress at different rates for different people. It also depends on the person's age when they are diagnosed and other health problems they may have. A person with Alzheimer's disease might live for 3 to 4 more years if the diagnosis was made after the age of 80. They may live 10 or more years longer if they were diagnosed at a younger age. No one knows what causes Alzheimer's disease. It cannot be cured and will not go away. Treatment may only help to manage symptoms and slow the disease.

Vascular Dementia

Vascular dementia is also known as multi-infarct dementia (MID). It occurs when repeated strokes destroy small areas of the brain. A stroke happens when a vessel taking blood and nutrients to an area of the brain becomes clogged or bursts. Blood and oxygen cannot get to that part of the brain, and brain cells die. This results in permanent brain damage.

The strokes may be so small that the person and people around them are not aware that they are happening. These "silent strokes" will finally lead to symptoms of vascular dementia as more areas of the brain are damaged by repeated strokes.

In other cases, the strokes are bigger and not so "silent." New symptoms of vascular dementia may develop fast with each stroke.

As with Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia cannot be cured and will not go away. Treatment is aimed at reducing the risk factors of the disease to prevent further strokes from occurring.

Risk factors include:

- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Smoking

Medicines can be used to manage the person's aggressive behavior or agitation, which sometimes occurs.

Depression

Depression is a medical condition. It involves more than just feeling "down" or "sad." Depression interferes with normal activities of life. While depression is not a type of dementia, many people with severe depression have some similar mental changes, such as poor memory and attention. When someone has both depression and dementia, memory loss may get worse.

Symptoms include:

- Unusual and excessive sadness or irritability
- Changes in sleep
- Changes in weight and eating
- Loss of interest in things the person had enjoyed
- Loss of energy
- Problems thinking and focusing
- Feelings of being worthless
- Thoughts of suicide or death

Depression can be treated with medicine and counseling.

Parkinson's Disease

Parkinson's disease (PD) occurs when the brain does not make enough of a certain chemical called dopamine. This chemical is used by the body to control muscle movement.

Symptoms include:

- Tremor in one or both hands, arms, or legs; trembling in the jaw and face
- Stiffness of the arms, legs, and joints
- Trouble starting to move
- Issues with balance and coordination

People may have problems walking, talking, and doing simple tasks as the disease progresses. Other symptoms may include depression, sleeping problems, speaking, swallowing, and chewing.

Treatment of PD is aimed at increasing the amount of dopamine. As PD gets worse, some people develop dementia.

Some people with Alzheimer's disease may show symptoms of Parkinson's disease. Certain medicines may help the PD symptoms, but they will not reverse the dementia.

Talk to your doctor and other members of your health care team about your questions and concerns about dementia.