

Dementia Information Page

What is Dementia?

Dementia is not a specific disease. It is a descriptive term for a collection of symptoms that can be caused by a number of disorders that affect the brain. People with dementia have significantly impaired intellectual functioning that interferes with normal activities and relationships. They also lose their ability to solve problems and maintain emotional control, and they may experience personality changes and behavioral problems, such as agitation, delusions, and hallucinations. While memory loss is a common symptom of dementia, memory loss by itself does not mean that a person has dementia. Doctors diagnose dementia only if two or more brain functions - such as memory and language skills - are significantly impaired without loss of consciousness. Some of the diseases that can cause symptoms of dementia are Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia, Lewy body dementia, frontotemporal dementia, Huntington's disease, and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. Doctors have identified other conditions that can cause dementia or dementia-like symptoms including reactions to medications, metabolic problems and endocrine abnormalities, nutritional deficiencies, infections, poisoning, brain tumors, anoxia or hypoxia (conditions in which the brain's oxygen supply is either reduced or cut off entirely), and heart and lung problems. Although it is common in very elderly individuals, dementia is not a normal part of the aging process.

Is there any treatment?

Drugs to specifically treat Alzheimer's disease and some other progressive dementias are now available. Although these drugs do not halt the disease or reverse existing brain damage, they can improve symptoms and slow the progression of the disease. This may improve an individual's quality of life, ease the burden on caregivers, or delay admission to a nursing home. Many researchers are also examining whether these drugs may be useful for treating other types of dementia. Many people with dementia, particularly those in the early stages, may benefit from practicing tasks designed to improve performance in specific aspects of cognitive functioning. For example, people can sometimes be taught to use memory aids, such as mnemonics, computerized recall devices, or note taking.

What is the prognosis?

There are many disorders that can cause dementia. Some, such as Alzheimer's disease or Huntington's disease, lead to a progressive loss of mental functions. But other types of dementia can be halted or reversed with appropriate treatment. People with moderate or advanced dementia typically need round-the-clock care and supervision to prevent them from harming themselves or others. They also may need assistance with daily activities such as eating, bathing, and dressing.

What research is being done?

The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) and other institutes of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) conduct research related to dementia in laboratories at the NIH and also support additional dementia research through grants to major medical institutions across the country. Current research focuses on many different aspects of dementia. This research promises to improve the lives of people affected by the dementias and may eventually lead to ways of preventing or curing these disorders.

Information provided by the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

Late stage dementia - what might you expect?

The person you're caring for has been living with dementia for a long time - perhaps many years. You've both had your fair share of problems but, generally speaking, you've coped admirably well. However:

- They now need round-the-clock care.
- They rarely talk or have little conversation.
- They no longer recognize you or any of their nearest and dearest.

The final stages of dementia can be incredibly hard for family and friends, but it's important to be realistic about what you can - or can't - cope with, and to accept any help that you're offered. Caregivers are often under a great deal of strain during this part of the journey, so make sure not to neglect your own health or needs.

Four symptoms of late stage dementia

- 1. Increased frailty** - Weight loss and other health issues, such as arthritis or a stroke, can lead the person you're caring for to become increasingly frail and less mobile. Many people with dementia also gradually lose the ability to walk- they may start shuffling or prefer to stay seated most of the time.
- 2. Total reliance on others** - They will need lots of help with eating, dressing, washing and using the loo. In fact, this may be too much for you to cope with yourself and you might find it's time to consider other options such as a care home.
- 3. Problems communicating** - Their verbal skills could now be very limited but it's important to allow them to talk anyway if they want to, and for you to continue talking to them as you normally would. They may try to communicate in other ways if that's easier. For example, some people may give clues through body language or facial expressions as to how they're feeling.
- 4. Severe memory loss** - Even memories from childhood which were once so vivid may now seem hazy and they're becoming increasingly disorientated. For example, believing they are newly married, or that you are their child not their partner.

What medications are used to treat end-stage dementia?

Numerous medications, such as opioids, neuroleptics and diuretics, can be used to treat end-stage dementia, according to Annals of Long-Term Care. Sublingual or parenteral medications are useful because administration of medicine in end-stage dementia is challenging for caregivers.

According to the Alzheimer's Society, the anti-dementia drug memantine is used to treat severe cases of Alzheimer's disease. The drug can be used to stabilize the condition of the patient and improve important skills such as walking and feeding. Memantine can also be used to improve the patient's aggressiveness and restlessness.

Warning

Each person with dementia is unique and these symptoms are only a guide as to what may happen in the later stages of dementia. Don't take them too literally.

Good to know

- There are still ways to make life more pleasant and more comfortable for your loved one by stimulating their senses. For example, try playing their favorite music, giving them a hand massage, or spraying their favorite perfume around their room.
- You aren't alone. Get support from other people who are going through something similar, either by joining a support group or by going online and talking to someone in our community.

Dementia

A group of thinking and social symptoms that interferes with daily functioning.

Very common

- More than **3 million** US cases per year
- Treatment can help, but this condition can't be cured
- Chronic: can last for years or be lifelong
- Requires a medical diagnosis
- Lab tests or imaging often required
- Not a specific disease, dementia is a group of conditions characterized by impairment of at least two brain functions, such as memory loss and judgment.
- Symptoms include forgetfulness, limited social skills, and thinking abilities so impaired that it interferes with daily functioning.
- Medications and therapies may help manage symptoms. Some causes are reversible.

Ages affected

0-2	Never
3-5	Very rare
6-13	Very rare
14-18	Very rare
19-40	Very rare
41-60	Rare
60+	Very common

Consult a doctor for medical advice

Sources: [Mayo Clinic](#)