

### **Introduction**

Dementia is a word that describes a group of symptoms caused by disorders that affect the brain. It is not a specific disease.

The symptoms of dementia affect a person's intellectual and social abilities. It can affect people of all ages. The condition is severe enough to cause problems with regular daily functions like going to the bathroom or remembering the names and faces of loved ones.

This reference summary explains the causes and symptoms of dementia. It discusses how dementia is diagnosed and treated, and includes information about ways to prevent dementia.

### **Dementia**

Dementia is not a specific disease. The word dementia is used to describe a group of symptoms that may be caused by a number of disorders that affect the brain. Dementia seriously weakens a person's intellectual abilities. This interferes with their normal activities and relationships.

People with dementia may lose their ability to solve problems and keep their emotions under control. They may experience personality changes and problems with their behavior, such as agitation, delusions, and hallucinations. Delusions are when a person believes things that are not true. Hallucinations are when a person sees, hears, smells, or feels things that no one else can. Certain diseases can cause symptoms of dementia.

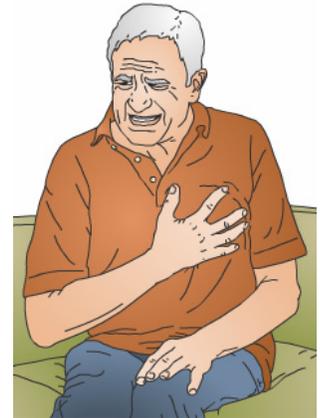


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Other health conditions that can cause dementia or dementia-like symptoms include:

- Reactions to medications
- Metabolic problems and endocrine abnormalities
- Nutritional deficiencies
- Infections
- Poisoning
- Brain tumors
- Fluid on the brain, also known as hydrocephalus
- Heart and lung problems



Metabolic problems are problems related to metabolism.

Metabolism refers to all of the chemical changes that take place in a cell or an organism to produce energy and basic materials needed for important life processes. Endocrine abnormalities are problems that affect the tissues responsible for making and releasing hormones. These hormones travel in the bloodstream and control the actions of other cells or organs.

Although dementia is common in very elderly people, dementia is not a normal part of the aging process.

## Symptoms

The symptoms of dementia depend on the cause. However, there are some symptoms that are commonly associated with dementia.

The most common symptom of dementia is memory loss. It is not unusual for a person with dementia to forget something and never remember it again. He or she might repeatedly ask the same question after it's already been answered.

People with dementia might forget simple words, or they might use the wrong words. This can make it very difficult to understand what they want.



People with dementia have difficulty performing familiar tasks, like cooking a meal or vacuuming the floor. For instance, a person may cook a meal but forget to serve it or vacuum the same room over and over again.

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People with dementia might also experience time and place confusion. They could get lost even though they are on a familiar street. They could also forget how they arrived at a certain place and how to get home.

Regularly misplacing things is another symptom of dementia. For instance, people with dementia might put a broom in the coat closet or a wristwatch in the silverware drawer.



Another symptom of dementia is poor judgment. A person with dementia may go outside during cold weather without a coat, or go out into the rain without an umbrella. The person may do this regularly. People with dementia might also have problems with abstract thinking. For instance, they could have difficulty using a checkbook because they forgot what the numbers mean and what has to be done with them.

A loss of initiative is another symptom of dementia. Some people with dementia become very passive and might not want to go to places or see people they once enjoyed.

Sudden mood swings are another symptom of dementia. It is not uncommon for a person with dementia to be laughing with joy one moment and crying with sorrow the next. People with dementia might also suffer severe changes in their personality. A person who is normally easy going and pleasant to be around could become agitated, fearful, or suspicious of close friends and family.



## Causes

Dementia is not a disease. It is a word used to describe a group of symptoms that can be caused by a number of disorders that affect the brain. Because of this, there are many different types of dementia.

When classifying dementias, or the different kinds of dementia, they are usually grouped by what they have in common. Progressive dementias, for example, are types of dementia that get worse over time.

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Types of progressive dementia include:

- Alzheimer's disease
- Vascular dementia
- Lewy body dementia
- Frontotemporal dementia

Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia in people over 60, but it can also happen to people younger than 60. Alzheimer's disease usually gets worse over 7 to 10 years. It causes a slow decline in cognitive abilities.



Vascular dementia is caused by problems with the arteries that carry blood to the brain. It results in brain damage. Several types of vascular dementia exist. Each type affects the body differently.

Lewy bodies are abnormal clumps of protein. They build up in areas of the brain that control some memory and motor control. It can cause visual hallucinations, fluctuation between confusion and clear thinking, body tremors and sleeping disorders.

Frontotemporal dementia causes damage to the nerve cells in the frontal and temporal lobes of the brain. These areas of the brain affect a person's language, behavior, and personality.

There are several other disorders that have been linked to dementia. These include:

- Huntington's disease
- Dementia pugilistica
- HIV-associated dementia
- Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease

Huntington's disease is passed on from parent to child. It causes the nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord to waste away. Symptoms typically begin between age 30 and 40 and may include mild irritability, anxiety and depression that progresses into severe dementia. Huntington's also causes problems with movement.

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Dementia pugilistica is caused by repeated trauma to the head. It is sometimes known as “boxer’s dementia” for this reason. Symptoms include memory problems, impaired speech, poor coordination, tremors, muscle stiffness, and slow movement.

HIV-associated dementia happens when the HIV virus destroys brain matter. This results in difficulty concentrating, social withdrawal, apathy, and impaired memory. Problems with movement may also develop.

Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease is a rare and fatal brain disorder. Symptoms usually appear around age 60 and include impaired judgment, personality changes, and problems with coordination, thinking, and vision. It becomes more severe as it progresses and often leads to blindness.

Not all types of dementia are progressive. Some causes of dementia can be reversed. These are known as non progressive dementias.

Non progressive dementias may be caused by:

- Infection or immune disorder
- Metabolic problem
- Dehydration or poor diet
- Medication reaction
- Subdural hematoma
- Poison
- Oxygen problems
- Brain tumor



If the underlying cause of a non progressive dementia is treated, the dementia may go away.

Cerebrospinal fluid is fluid that flows in and around the hollow spaces of the brain and spinal cord, and between thin layers of tissue that cover and protect the brain and spinal cord. Buildup of cerebrospinal fluid in the brain can cause hydrocephalus, or water on the brain. This is another cause of dementia.

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Hydrocephalus is usually accompanied by difficulty in walking and incontinence.

Incontinence is the inability to control the flow of urine from the bladder, known as urinary incontinence, or the escape of stool from the rectum, known as fecal incontinence.

Hydrocephalus needs surgical treatment by placing a shunt that will redirect the excess fluid from the brain to the abdomen.



## Diagnosis

Diagnosing the cause of dementia can be a challenge. It may require several visits to the doctor. There is not one test that can diagnose the cause of dementia. This is because there are many possible causes of the symptoms associated with dementia.

Doctors diagnose dementia only if two or more brain functions are significantly impaired without loss of consciousness. An example of this is the loss of both memory and language skills.

A healthcare provider will begin by reviewing the patient's medical history. This includes how and when the symptoms began. It also includes talking about any health issues that may help identify the cause of dementia. For example, recent head trauma could indicate an underlying cause of dementia.

When diagnosing a condition that causes problems with memory, a healthcare provider may want to interview friends, family, and other caregivers. These people are able to share concerns about the changes they have witnessed that the patient might be unaware of.

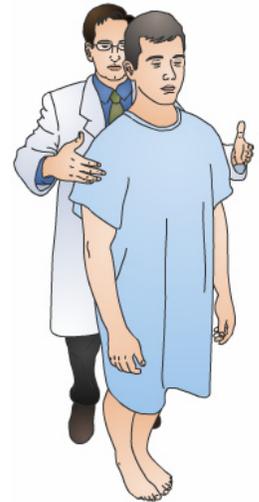
The healthcare provider will also perform a physical exam. This exam could help identify signs of a stroke or other disorder that may cause similar symptoms.



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People screened for dementia may also complete tests that focus on their ability to remember, think and reason. Emotional health may also be evaluated. These tests can determine the presence and severity of dementia and show the part of the brain it is affecting. Another kind of examination evaluates a person's balance, sensory function and reflexes.



Brain scans and other tests will be done to identify strokes, tumors, or other problems that may cause dementia. These include:

- Computerized tomography, or CT
- Magnetic resonance imaging , or MRI
- Electroencephalogram, or EEG

A CT scan is an x-ray machine linked to a computer. A CT scan takes a series of detailed pictures of your organs. An MRI is used to make detailed pictures of areas inside your body. It uses strong magnets to create images of the inside of the body. An EEG detects and records patterns of electrical activity in the brain using electrodes that are placed on the scalp. It checks for abnormal patterns in brain wave activity.

Laboratory tests can also be used to diagnose dementia. There are many lab tests that can rule out other conditions, such as kidney failure, that can contribute to the symptoms. Many treatable medical conditions are associated with dementia.

A psychiatric evaluation may also be performed to determine if a psychiatric disorder, like depression, is contributing to the symptoms.

## Treatment

There is no standard treatment for dementia. The cause of the dementia should be treated if it is found. The following forms of treatment may help slow or minimize the symptoms related to dementia.

Medications that help with memory, judgment and learning may be used. Healthcare providers may also treat the underlying cause of dementia to slow or stop its progress. For example, drugs to control high blood pressure or heart disease may be prescribed to prevent a stroke.



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Specific symptoms and behavior problems may be treated with certain medications. Antidepressants, sedatives, or other medications could be prescribed by a healthcare provider to ease problems associated with these symptoms.

If the dementia is thought to be caused by a brain tumor, a brain hemorrhage or fluid buildup on the brain, then surgery may be needed.



## **Risk Factors**

A risk factor is anything that increases a person's chances of developing a health problem. Not everyone who has a risk factor for dementia will get dementia. Some people with no risk factors will develop dementia.

Some of the risk factors associated with dementia cannot be changed or prevented. These include:

- Age
- Family history
- Down syndrome

Down syndrome is a disorder caused by the presence of an extra chromosome 21 and characterized by intellectual disability and distinguishing physical features.

Dementia is not a normal part of the aging process. But, the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia, and several other dementias increases with age. People with a family history of dementia have a greater risk of developing it. Not everyone with a history of dementia will develop it. But a family history of specific genetic mutations, like Huntington's disease, increases the risk of developing some types of dementia.

Some of the risk factors associated with dementia can be changed or prevented. For example, alcohol abuse, or frequently consuming large amounts of alcohol, may increase the risk of dementia.

A buildup of fats and other substances in and on artery walls increases the risk of developing vascular dementia. Blood pressure that is too high or too low may also put a person at risk for developing dementia.

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Smoking makes it more difficult for blood to flow through the arteries and increases the risk of developing different types of vascular disease. This makes smoking a risk factor for developing certain types of dementia.

High levels of “bad” cholesterol, known as LDL cholesterol, can greatly increase the risk of developing vascular dementia and possibly Alzheimer’s disease. Having type 2 diabetes also increases the risk for developing both conditions.

Elevated levels of homocysteine may increase the risk of Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia.

Normally, the body uses certain vitamins to break down homocysteine. Homocysteine is an amino acid produced by the body. It is usually the byproduct of eating meat. Elevated levels could result if the body doesn’t metabolize these vitamins well or doesn’t get enough of these vitamins due to poor nutrition.



## Preventing Dementia

There is no guaranteed way to prevent dementia. However, there are steps you can take to lower your risk of developing the condition.

To lower your risk for dementia, keep your mind active. Try playing puzzle or word games. Learn a new language or how to play an instrument. Read and write. Draw or paint. These activities can delay the onset of dementia or decrease its effects.



Another way to delay the onset of dementia is to be physically and socially active. Walking, jogging, swimming and dancing are good ways to stay physically active. Watching a play, going to a museum, or hosting a weekly card game are just a few ways to stay socially active.

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Lowering your cholesterol could help lower your risk for developing dementia. Cholesterol deposits can form in the brain and cause vascular dementia. Certain drugs that help lower cholesterol may be available. Talk to your healthcare provider about the different ways you can lower your cholesterol.

Eating a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and certain fish and nuts can help decrease your risk of developing dementia.

Quitting smoking is another way to decrease your risk for developing dementia. Also, lowering your blood pressure or keeping it at normal levels can significantly reduce your risk of dementia.



## Summary

Dementia is a word used to describe a group of symptoms that may be caused by a number of disorders that affect the brain. Although dementia is common in very elderly individuals, dementia is not a normal part of the aging process.

Dementia weakens a person's intellectual abilities. People with dementia may lose their ability to solve problems and keep their emotions under control. They may experience personality changes and problems with their behavior, such as agitation, delusions, and hallucinations.

There are many causes of memory loss and other symptoms that are commonly associated with dementia. Diagnosis can be a challenge. It may require several visits to the doctor.

Dementia also may affect the way different body systems function. This can cause problems with the day-to-day tasks a person usually performs.

The treatment of dementia largely depends on its cause. There is no guaranteed way to prevent dementia. However, there are steps you can take to lower your risk of developing the condition. Maintaining an active body and mind may decrease your risk for developing dementia.



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