

November 2014 • Members

Dementia

What is dementia?

Dementia is a term used to refer to a group of symptoms. These symptoms are linked to memory loss and a decrease in thinking skills. They keep the person from being able to do simple tasks of daily living. And they get worse over time—either slowly or quickly.

These symptoms are seen mostly in people over 65, but they are not a part of normal aging.

Symptoms of dementia

These things can be seen in people with dementia:

- Memory loss
 - Can't remember what they did yesterday
 - Can't remember important dates or events
 - Can't remember names of common things (eg, glass, spoon, toothbrush)
 - Can't remember where they put things
- Trouble with reasoning and judgment
 - Trouble paying bills
 - Trouble making and keeping appointments
 - Trusting and giving money to telemarketers
- Difficulty communicating
 - Stop in the middle of what they are saying and don't know how to continue
 - Telling the same story or asking the same question over and over
 - Can't follow what someone else is saying
- Confusion
 - Get lost in their own neighborhood
 - Get mixed up about what day of the week it is, what season or year it is
 - Put their toothbrush in the refrigerator instead of the medicine cabinet



Is it dementia or a "senior moment?"

As we age, we become more forgetful. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between a senior moment and dementia. These things might help.

Signs of a senior moment

- Temporarily forget a name, phone number, PIN, etc.
- Occasionally forget an appointment, but remember it afterwards
- Sometimes misplace keys or other items
- Forget what you were going to get when you went into a room
- Lists and other memory aids keep you on track
- Not worried about memory loss

Signs of dementia

- Often forget names, phone numbers, PIN, etc.
- Often forget appointments and not remember them afterwards
- Often misplace keys or other items or forget what an item is used for
- Tend to forget recent things but remember things from the past

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- Personality change
 - Become withdrawn
 - Become suspicious of people, even their own family members
 - Become depressed
 - Become anxious
 - Get upset or angry for no reason
 - Stop doing things they used to like doing
 - Stop bathing and changing into clean clothes
- Vision problems
 - Difficulty reading
 - Trouble judging distances
 - Can't see difference in colors
 - Hard to detect movement
 - Can't recognize people

Not just Alzheimer disease

Alzheimer disease is the most common cause of dementia. It causes about 60% to 80% of all cases.¹ But there are many other causes of dementia. As many as 9% of all cases are treatable.² Unfortunately, the 3 most common causes are not treatable.

Treatable and untreatable causes of dementia

Treatment for these causes might be able to reverse the signs of dementia:

- Combinations of different drugs
- Drug and/or alcohol abuse
- Not enough folate in the diet
- Low blood sugar
- Underactive thyroid
- Too much fluid in the brain caused by an infection, head injury, tumor, or stroke
- Severe depression (false dementia)
- Blood that collects between the brain and its outer covering
- Various kidney, liver, and lung diseases
- Not enough vitamin B12 in the diet

Signs of dementia (continued)

- Unable to learn new things
- Hard to manage daily affairs like balancing a checkbook or paying bills
- Worried about memory loss or have no awareness of it
- Family and friends notice memory lapses or other symptoms

How to keep your brain sharp

- Be physically active—walk quickly for about 45 minutes 3 times a week
- Eat a healthy diet—low in saturated fat, high in fruits and vegetables
- Drink alcohol in moderation or not at all
- Stay away from tobacco
- Exercise your brain—learn something new often
- Be social—have some fun with your friends

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Treatment for these causes won't reverse the signs of dementia:

- Alzheimer disease
- Multiple small strokes (vascular cognitive impairment)
- Frontotemporal dementia (Pick disease)
- Lewy body dementia
- AIDS dementia complex
- Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease
- Huntington disease
- Parkinson disease

How doctors find out if a person's dementia is treatable

Doctors look at a combination of things to find out what is causing the dementia. Once they know the cause, they will know if treatment might reverse the signs of dementia.

Doctors first look at a person's history. What medical conditions does the person have? What medicines is the person taking? Has the person had a brain injury before? Has the person had a stroke? What symptoms does the person have? Do any blood relatives have the same problem?

Next doctors ask some questions to find out more about how well the person's brain is working. This might be followed with laboratory tests. These tests are very important for finding the cause. Laboratory tests include:

- Blood tests for calcium, CBC, B12, folate, glucose, kidney function, liver function, and TSH
- Blood testing to detect certain types of infection
- Cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) testing for amyloid beta 1-42, tau and p-tau proteins, and 14-3-3 protein
- Blood testing for genetic changes

Finally, doctors do a brain scan to see what the brain looks like and how it is working.

When to talk with your doctor about dementia

If you or a loved one have symptoms, talk with a doctor. It's important to get a diagnosis. You could find out that there is a treatment that will make the symptoms go away.

If you have Medicare, you are eligible for dementia screening. This would be done at the time of your annual wellness visit. Be sure to ask your doctor about this.

References

1. Moyer VA, U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. Screening for cognitive impairment in older adults: U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommendation statement. *Ann Intern Med.* 2014;160:791-797.
2. Alzheimer's Association. 2014 Alzheimer's disease facts and figures. *Alzheimers Dement.* 2014;10(2):e47-e92.