

WHAT IS DEMENTIA?

Dementia is the progressive loss of brain function. It occurs as a result of physical changes in the structure of the brain. These changes affect memory, thinking, behaviour and emotion. The most common form of dementia is Alzheimer's disease. Other kinds of dementia include vascular dementia, dementia with Lewy bodies and fronto-temporal dementia. Dementia is not a normal part of the ageing process.

WHAT CAUSES DEMENTIA?

We do not yet know exactly what causes dementia.

No one single factor has been identified as a cause for Alzheimer's disease. It is likely that a combination of factors, including age, genetic inheritance and environment are responsible.

Vascular dementia is caused by damage to the blood vessels supplying the brain. People who smoke or have high blood pressure, high levels of fats in their blood, or diabetes are at risk of developing vascular dementia. The causes of dementia with Lewy bodies and fronto-temporal dementia are currently unknown.

WHO GETS DEMENTIA?

People of all ethnic groups and intellectual ability can get dementia. While it is more common in people over the age of 65, it can also affect people as young as 45.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF DEMENTIA?

Dementia is progressive, which means symptoms will gradually get worse, but how quickly and in what ways depend on the individual. Every person with dementia is different.

Common symptoms include:

- Gradual memory loss
- Repeating statements or questions
- Difficulty performing familiar tasks
- Difficulty handling money
- Loss of initiative
- Impaired judgement
- Disorientation of time and place
- Personality changes
- Changes in mood or behaviour
- Problems with language
- Deterioration in driving skills
- Misplacing things

Gradually, most functions of the brain are affected. Eventually, people with dementia may need help with daily activities such as dressing, going to the toilet, showering and eating.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I AM CONCERNED ABOUT MYSELF OR SOMEONE I KNOW?

It is important not to jump to conclusions.

Confusion or forgetfulness may not mean you, or a loved one, has dementia. Many other treatable conditions such as infections, side effects of medication and depression can cause similar problems.

1. Firstly, contact your GP and discuss your concerns. Ask for a thorough physical, neurological and social evaluation. Write down a list of issues prior to your visit and take someone with you to the appointment. Your GP may ask a specialist to help in establishing a diagnosis.

There is no single specific test to show whether someone has dementia. Dementia can only be diagnosed by ruling out other possible causes of the symptoms. This is why a full medical assessment is important.

2. Secondly, contact your local Alzheimers organisation to receive support, information and education. Although there is no cure for most causes of dementia, there is a lot of help available. Medication is available to relieve some symptoms for some people for a period of time. It is important that you seek help early.

An early diagnosis will:

- Help you plan for the future
- Enable you to benefit from medication
- Help you identify sources of advice and support

WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE?

If you or someone you care about has dementia, it is only natural to feel distressed and concerned. You do not have to face this alone. Getting help, support and advice can make a big difference. Alzheimers New Zealand's 23 local branches provide information and support and access to services for people with all forms of dementia, their carers, family and friends.

Other services provided by local Alzheimers organisations may include:

- Support groups for carers and family
- Support groups for people with dementia, for example, early onset dementia and "blokes" groups
- Educational talks
- Resources and information
- Carer education programmes
- Day and activity programmes
- Companion services

At a national level, Alzheimers New Zealand's supports the work of the local branches, represents people with dementia, their carers and families, through advocacy, raising public awareness and providing information.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT YOUR LOCAL ALZHEIMERS ORGANISATION.

FREEPHONE 0800 004 001

Alzheimers New Zealand National Office
Level 3, Adelphi Finance House,
15 Courtenay Place, PO Box 3643,
Wellington 6140

Phone 04 381 2362

Facsimile 04 381 2365

Email nationaloffice@alzheimers.org.nz

Web www.alzheimers.org.nz

Charity registration CC21026

Patron Lady Hillary

Member Alzheimer's Disease International

WHAT IS DEMENTIA?

