

Alzheimer's Disease

and other forms of dementia

Dementia is a general term for conditions involving permanent loss of memory and thinking ability. The memory loss is different to normal forgetting and is not a normal part of ageing. Support services are available for people with dementia and their families and carers.

There are a number of different forms of dementia with different causes.

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia. It makes brain cells die. Alzheimers disease usually develops after the age of 65 years, but can begin earlier. Vascular dementia, caused by poor blood flow to the brain (e.g. after a stroke), is the second most common form of dementia.

Signs and symptoms

Dementia affects different people in different ways. Although what a person can do may change from day to day, dementia usually gets worse over time.

Signs and symptoms include:

- problems with memory and thinking.

- changes in personality, mood and behaviour.
- problems with talking and communicating.
- difficulty with everyday tasks.

A person with early or mild dementia may:

- lose interest in hobbies and activities.
- forget details of recent events.
- show poor judgment and make poor decisions.
- blame others for 'stealing' things they have lost.
- repeat themselves, make mistakes when talking or forget what they are talking about.
- be unwilling to try new things or less able to cope with change.

- have difficulty handling money, following directions and carrying out everyday tasks.

These symptoms are often hard to notice or may be blamed on old age or stress.

A person with **moderate dementia** needs increasing help to manage day-to-day living.

At this stage, the person may:

- be more forgetful of recent events.
- be confused about time and place.
- forget names of family and friends, or confuse one person for another.
- begin to wander or get lost if away from familiar surroundings.
- be unable to carry out basic tasks (e.g. bathing, dressing, eating) without help.
- behave in a way that is not suitable or that may embarrass others.
- see or hear things that are not there.
- easily become restless, angry or upset.

A person with **advanced** or **severe dementia** is very disabled and needs total care.

Management

Education and support services are available for people with dementia, their families and carers through Alzheimer's Australia and other services. Some people with Alzheimer's disease can be helped by medicines which improve or slow down the decline of their mental

function for a limited time. Medicines can also help relieve other symptoms that occur with dementia (e.g. anxiety, depression). Ask a doctor for advice.

What to do if concerned

Gently talk about your concerns with the person and offer to go with them to their doctor. If you are concerned about your husband, wife or partner and you share the same doctor, talk with your doctor.

Communicating

When communicating with a person with dementia:

- Always show respect.
- Keep calm and speak clearly, naturally and gently.
- Keep eye contact and look friendly.
- Avoid background noise.
- Use short, simple sentences, focussing on one idea at a time.
- Allow plenty of time for the person to answer.
- If the person is having problems communicating, gently help them.

Ways to help

Family and friends play an important part in the lives of people with dementia. They provide valuable links to the past and help a person with dementia to feel loved and valued.

Family and friends can support people with dementia and their carers by:

- learning about dementia.
- asking how they can help (some people find it hard to ask for help, but may gladly accept help).
- offering to spend time with the person with dementia to give the carer a break.
- offering practical help, such as supplying a meal or helping with shopping or gardening.
- listening carefully (without judging) and supporting difficult decisions.

Self care

For people with early dementia

- Get a complete assessment from your local doctor and referral to specialists if necessary.
- Seek support from family and friends.
- Contact Alzheimer's Australia for information and support.
- Find out about the range of community services available in your area by contacting the Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centre.
- If you are having difficulty managing your medicines, ask your pharmacist about a medicine organiser or blister pack (e.g. *Websterpak*)
- Think about wearing a bracelet or necklace (e.g. *MedicAlert* bracelet) stating your name and address.

To help your memory and thinking:

- Eat regular, healthy meals and snacks, including plenty of fruits, vegetables and wholegrain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises not to).
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week.
- Do stimulating activities that you enjoy.

For carers

The physical and emotional demands of caring for a person with dementia can be very tiring.

- Learn as much as you can about dementia and the help available (e.g. Alzheimer's Australia has more than 70 help sheets on different issues about dementia).
- Make time for your own needs.
- Look after your own health.
- Seek support from family and friends.
- Join a support group – contact Alzheimer's Australia for advice.
- Check with Department of Human Services (Centrelink) about financial support.

For more information

MedicAlert Foundation

Phone: 1800 88 22 22
www.medicalert.org.au

Alzheimer's Australia

Phone the National Dementia Helpline on
1800 100 500
Website: www.fightdementia.org.au

The Aged Care Information Line

Phone: 1800 200 422
Website: www.agedcareaustralia.gov.au

Carer Advisory and Counselling Service

Phone: 1800 242 636
Website: www.carersaustralia.com.au

Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centres

Phone: 1800 052 222
For emergency respite support
Phone: 1800 059 059
Website: www.commcarelink.health.gov.au

Department of Human Services (Centrelink)

Phone: 13 2717
Website: www.humanservices.gov.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222
Website: www.healthdirect.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on
CMI leaflets.

NPS Medicine Wise Medicines Information Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)
Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from
anywhere in Australia.

***Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when
choosing a medicine.***

Related fact cards

- » Anxiety
- » Bladder and Urine Control
- » Carer Support (electronic only – ask your pharmacist)
- » Constipation
- » Depression
- » Preventing Falls
- » Relaxation Techniques
- » Sleeping Problems
- » Urinary Tract Infections

Your Self Care Pharmacy: