

What is dementia?

If you, or a friend or relative, have been , you may be feeling anxious or confused. You may not know what dementia is. This factsheet should help answer some of your questions about dementia, including what causes it and how it is diagnosed. The term 'dementia' describes a set of symptoms which include loss of memory, mood changes, and problems with communication and reasoning. These symptoms occur when the brain is damaged by certain diseases, including Alzheimer's disease and damage caused by a series of small strokes.

Dementia is , which means the symptoms will gradually get worse. How fast dementia progresses will depend on the individual person and what type of dementia they have. Each person is unique and will experience dementia in their own way. It is often the case that the person's family and friends are more concerned about the symptoms than the person may be themselves.

may include the following:

- Loss of memory – this particularly affects short-term memory, for example forgetting what happened earlier in the day, not being able to recall conversations, being repetitive or forgetting the way home from the shops. Long-term memory is usually still quite good.
- Mood changes – people with dementia may be withdrawn, sad, frightened or angry about what is happening to them.
- Communication problems – including problems finding the right words for things, for example describing the function of an item instead of naming it.

In the , the person affected will have problems carrying out everyday tasks and will become increasingly dependent on other people.

What causes dementia?

There are several diseases and conditions that result in dementia. These include: [Alzheimer's disease](#) – The most common cause of dementia. During the course of the disease the chemistry and structure of the brain change, leading to the death of brain cells. Problems of short-term memory are usually the first noticeable sign.

– If the oxygen supply to the brain fails due to vascular disease, brain cells are likely to die and this can cause

the symptoms of vascular dementia. These symptoms can occur either suddenly, following a stroke, or over time through a series of small strokes.

– This form of dementia gets its name from tiny abnormal structures that develop inside nerve cells. Their presence in the brain leads to the degeneration of brain tissue. Symptoms can include disorientation and hallucinations, as well as problems with planning, reasoning and problem solving. Memory may be affected to a lesser degree. This form of dementia shares some characteristics with Parkinson's disease.

– In fronto-temporal dementia, damage is usually focused in the front part of the brain. At first, personality and behaviour changes are the most obvious signs.

Who gets dementia? There are about 800,000 people in the UK with dementia. Dementia mainly affects people over the age of 65 and the likelihood increases with age. However, it can affect : there are over 17,000 people in the UK under the age of 65 who have dementia. Dementia can affect men and women. Scientists are investigating the genetic background to dementia. It does appear that in a few rare cases the diseases that cause dementia can be inherited. Some people with a particular genetic make-up have a higher risk than others of developing dementia.

Can dementia be cured?

Most forms of dementia cannot be cured, although is continuing into developing drugs, vaccines and other . Drugs have been developed that can temporarily alleviate some of the symptoms of some types of dementia.

How can I tell if I have dementia? Many people fear they have dementia, particularly if they think that their is getting worse or if they have known someone who has had the illness. Becoming forgetful does not necessarily mean that you have dementia: memory loss can be an effect of ageing, and it can also be a sign of stress or depression. In rare cases, dementia-like symptoms can be caused by vitamin deficiencies and/or a brain tumour.

Diagnosing dementia It is very important to get a . A diagnosis will help the rule out any illnesses that might have similar symptoms to dementia, including depression. Having a diagnosis may also mean it is possible to be prescribed drugs for Alzheimer's disease. Whether you are someone with dementia or a carer, a diagnosis can help with preparing and planning for the future.

Dementia can be diagnosed by a doctor - either a GP or a specialist. The specialist may be a geriatrician (a doctor specialising in the care of older people), a neurologist (someone who concentrates on diseases of the

nervous system) or a psychiatrist (a mental health specialist). The doctor may carry out a number of tests to check basic thinking processes and the ability to perform daily tasks. They may request further tests, such as a brain scan or a more in-depth assessment of memory, concentration and thinking skills.