

Dementia: A Fact Sheet to Share

Memory loss that disrupts everyday life is not part of the normal aging process. It is a symptom of dementia, a decline in memory, thinking, and reasoning skills. Dementia is a general term for the loss of an individual's cognitive capabilities. Dementia used to be considered a natural part of growing old, but we now know that dementia is not normal and it is symptomatic of another disease. An estimated 10 percent of people over the age of 65 and 47 percent of people over the age of 85 suffer from dementia. Between 40 and 60 percent of people with dementia develop psychiatric complications.

Although irreversible forms of dementia such as Alzheimer's do occur with greater frequency in old age, many other cases of dementia are brought on by medical conditions that can be slowed or reversed. There are over 70 different illnesses that can cause or mimic dementia including depression, thyroid disorders, infections, nutritional deficiencies and drug reactions. Signs of dementia such as memory loss, bizarre or unpredictable behaviors and poor judgment should never be dismissed as normal. An older adult exhibiting dementia should be seen by a physician for an appropriate diagnosis as soon as possible.

Symptoms of Dementia

Symptoms of dementia range from mild to severe, and interfere with daily life, safety and independence. Possible symptoms include:

- Memory problems – not being able to recognize once familiar things, places and people
- Difficulty performing familiar tasks, forgetting everyday routines, not knowing how to use common items or how to participate in a favorite hobby
- Difficulty planning, initiating and carrying out tasks
- Poor judgement and decision making and reasoning
- Difficulty with language or communication – forgetting simple words, inability to put together a sentence, substituting unusual words
- Distinct changes in personality, mood and behavior
- Inability to make new memories or learn new information
- Disorientation to time and place – getting lost in familiar places, confusing time (i.e. thinking it is morning when it is night)
- Withdrawal from people, social situations or activities that they used to enjoy
- Problems focusing or concentrating

- Decline in self-care
- Changes in the coordination and control of body movements

Types of Dementia

Alzheimer's Disease – The most common form of irreversible and progressive dementia. Alzheimer's disease destroys memory and thinking skills, and eventually the ability to carry out simple tasks of daily living.

Vascular Dementia – The second most common form of dementia. High blood pressure, heart problems, high cholesterol and diabetes can cause or increase damage to the vascular system, leading to vascular dementia. The disease can occur suddenly. A person will not be able to think clearly, be confused and have difficulty functioning. Treatment can help a person regain some functioning and reduce future episodes so it is important to seek medical attention immediately.

Lewy Body and Parkinson's Dementia – Two different forms of dementia that involve cognitive impairment and difficulty with movement. Dementia with Lewy body will begin with cognitive decline, similar to Alzheimer's disease (often leading to misdiagnosis) with movement problems following. Parkinson's disease dementia begins with movement problems such as muscle stiffness, tremor and slow movements and develop cognitive problems later. There is no cure for either, but treatments can help with symptoms.

Frontotemporal Dementia – Language and behavior change first in a person's 50s or early 60s. Loss of impulse control, inappropriate behavior, poor judgement and memory problems follow. There is no cure, but treatments for behavioral symptoms exist.

Delirium

Delirium is a very serious condition that is similar to dementia. It requires immediate attention as it can be quickly treated with appropriate medical intervention. Delirium is recognizable by a very short attention span, confusion, poor judgement and disorientation. Delirium is a cognitive response to treatable physical problems such as infection, illness or a medication problem, meaning that delirium can be reversed if spotted quickly.

For information about finding treatment, look for the Maryland Coalition on Mental Health and Aging's fact sheet "[Accessing Mental Health Care in Maryland.](#)"

More information can be found on the website www.mdaging.org

If you would like more information or assistance, contact Kim Burton at:

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