

health notes

Dementia: Do you wonder if someone you know has it?

What is dementia?

Dementia is a health condition that gradually causes a person to lose their ability to remember, learn, and communicate independently. Over time, a person with dementia will have increasing difficulty thinking, making decisions, and carrying out daily activities. Scientists and physicians are learning more about this condition all the time.

From time to time, all people forget things for a while and then remember them later. And, it is normal for this to increase slightly as we get older. This is not dementia. People with dementia not only forget important information, but they also have a limited ability to register and recall new things and to make sound decisions.

The most common type of dementia is caused by the destruction of brain cells. Other forms of dementia are caused by damage to the brain's blood vessels. A brain injury, stroke, or a series of mini-strokes affect the flow of blood in the brain and can lead to the development of dementia.

Who gets dementia?

The chances of developing dementia increases as you get older. Although dementia is more common in people age 65 and older, it can occur earlier in life. Dementia is a disease; it is not a normal part of aging.

Approximately 8% of the Canadian population over 65 has some form of dementia and 35% of Canadians over 85 show signs of dementia.

Dementia appears to be somewhat hereditary, as it tends to develop often in people with a family history of the disease. However, having a parent with dementia does not guarantee you will also develop dementia. It is not contagious. It cannot be transmitted by touch or by sharing an item with a person living with dementia.

What is the difference between dementia and Alzheimer disease?

Alzheimer disease is one form of dementia. There are numerous types of dementia, but Alzheimer disease is the most common and the best known. About 60% to 70% of all people with dementia have Alzheimer disease alone, or in association with other forms of dementia.

Is there a cure?

There is currently no cure for dementia. However, there are medications that can slow its progress. These may improve some symptoms for a time and delay progression of the condition. Additional medications to help people with dementia are being developed now.

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Preventing dementia

Currently, there is no scientific evidence that dementia can be prevented. However, there are things you can do that may reduce your risk of facing a decline in memory and cognitive function.

Properly control related diseases

If you have high blood pressure, diabetes, or other risk factors for blood vessel disease, make sure that you follow medical advice.

Avoid excess alcohol and drugs

Excess consumption of alcohol or “recreational” drugs is harmful to your health.

Keep your mind active

Do crossword puzzles, read the newspaper, play a musical instrument.

Stay physically active

Go for walks, take a dance class, join a gym, go swimming or cycling.

Maintain a balanced diet

Eat healthy, nutritious meals with adequate vitamin intake.

Eat fish at least once per week

Omega-3 fatty acids in fish oils protect your arteries and can improve blood flow to the brain.

Signs of dementia

There are many common signs of early-stage dementia. It is important to remember these signs are different from normal changes due to aging. Not everyone who has dementia will have all the signs listed below – these are only examples of possible signs of dementia.

Loss of short-term memory	Asking the same question over and over within a matter of minutes
Difficulty with familiar tasks	Cooking a meal but forgetting to serve it or forgetting how to make a familiar dish
Problems communicating	A frequent inability to remember the right word to use, or using the wrong word in a sentence
Time and place disorientation	Getting lost in familiar places and being unable to get home again
Lack of judgment	Forgetting to eat dinner or walk the dog, acting without consideration of the consequences
Problems with abstract thinking	Forgetting what numbers are, or how to add, subtract, multiply, or divide
Misplacing items	Placing an iron in the freezer or a wristwatch in the sugar bowl, for example
Mood swings	Acting out of character by quickly changing from being calm to crying to angry within minutes
Personality changes	A calm, quiet person drastically changing to someone who may be irritable, suspicious, or fearful

Source: Alzheimer's Society of Canada

You may be feeling a sense of fear, confusion, or anger about seeing signs of early dementia in yourself or a loved one. These feelings are normal. Don't let your emotions hold you back from seeking valuable information and support that will help you handle the changes that will occur as time progresses.

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Diagnosing dementia

If you recognize some of the signs of dementia in yourself or a loved one, a visit to a family doctor is the best next step. A family doctor can perform tests to determine if a person has dementia. Your family doctor may refer you to a specialist. Physicians who specialize in dementia include geriatricians, neurologists, and psychiatrists.

Medications

Medications are available to treat some forms of dementia. In most cases, currently available medications slow the rate of progression of the condition. Other medications may help manage anxiety, depression, and behavioural symptoms. New drugs are in development. Your doctors will be able to advise you of the medications that may help in your circumstances.

Living with dementia

A person with dementia can live for many years after developing the first symptoms of this illness. Most people with dementia continue to live in their home after they are diagnosed, with the help of family members, close friends, and professional caregivers. Staying active and connected to family, friends, and interests are important to the health and well-being of a person with dementia. As the disease progresses, it may become too difficult to provide care at home, and the person living with dementia may need to move to a long-term care facility. This decision should be made jointly between the caregivers and the family doctor.

Planning ahead

Talk to your doctor. Learning about this illness helps family members or other caregivers handle the changes caused by dementia. Plan to discuss your options and your questions with your physician.

Many people make financial plans for the future. But it is also important to plan now for the health care needs you may have in the future.

Adults in British Columbia can record their health care wishes and legal and financial decisions in writing. These documents, called *health care directives* or *living wills*, speak for you if you become unable to communicate this information on your own. Consider discussing this option with a loved one in the early stages of dementia. It is a good idea to speak with a lawyer or notary public when preparing these documents to ensure they meet legal standards.

You may also want to consider writing a *representation agreement* to appoint a health representative. Your representative can legally make health care decisions on your behalf. Plan to discuss your decisions with your doctor so he or she knows if you have a document or an appointed health representative.

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This information is also available as a printed pamphlet, along with pamphlets on other health topics, at www.bcma.org

This information is provided as a supplement to your doctor's care, and while we have made every effort to ensure its accuracy, it is not a replacement for medical advice. Please contact your doctor with any questions.