



What is Dementia?

Dementia occurs when the brain is affected by a disease. It is not a natural part of ageing.

Everyone with Dementia will have a different range of symptoms. These can include problems with memory, thinking, concentration and language. The individual may become confused or struggle with perception. Dementia can cause changes in mood or emotion and affect how the person behaves.

Dementia is a progressive disease (gets worse over time). However, many people lead active and fulfilling lives for many years. Dementia is caused by physical changes in the brain. As dementia progresses, the structure and chemistry of the brain changes which leads to cell damage and eventually death of the brain cells.

There are many different types of Dementia. The most common are Alzheimer's disease and Vascular Dementia. A few types are listed in more detail below. Some people are diagnosed with **Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI)** which is similar to dementia but less serious. People with MCI have a higher risk of developing dementia but not all of them will.

Alzheimer's Disease:

This is the most common cause and affects about 55% of all people with a Dementia.

Plaques and tangles build up in the brain which disrupts how nerve cells work and communicate. The affected nerve cells eventually die. There are also low levels of important chemicals in the brain which means messages don't travel around the brain as well as they should.

Onset is usually gradual over time, starting with mild memory loss. The first changes are usually in the part of the brain that controls memory and learning.

Vascular Dementia:

This type of dementia is caused when there is a problem with the blood supply to the brain and therefore oxygen supply is limited. This results in the death of brain cells. There are several types of vascular dementia. One type is caused by a stroke. Terms may include **multi-infarct dementia** or **stroke related dementia**.

Symptoms can begin suddenly and then remain stable or even get a little better in the early stages. The condition usually gets worse in steps. Symptoms can vary depending on the part of the brain affected. Memory loss isn't always a common early symptom. The individual may have difficulty concentrating or they may become depressed or anxious.

Mixed Dementia:

It is possible for someone to have more than one type of dementia (mixed dementia). The most common combination is Alzheimer's disease with vascular dementia.

Dementia with Lewy Bodies:

Tiny abnormal protein structures called Lewy Bodies develop inside the brain cells. These structures interrupt the functioning of the brain, reducing the levels of chemical messengers and causing cells to die.

Lewy Bodies are also found in people with Parkinson's disease and 1/3 of people with Parkinson's disease will go on to develop Dementia.

Symptoms can vary from day to day with this type of dementia. A person may find it hard to remain alert, reason and problem solve. Visual hallucinations and disturbed sleep patterns are common symptoms. Memory is usually affected less than in Alzheimer's disease. The person may also develop Parkinson's like symptoms including slow and rigid movements, balance problems and sometimes shaking.

Frontotemporal Dementia:

There are 3 forms: behavioural variant, semantic dementia and progressive non-fluent aphasia. It was originally called Pick's disease and you will still hear the term used occasionally. It mainly affects people in their 40's, 50's and 60's and is caused by damage to the frontal and temporal lobes. These are the areas that control behaviour, emotional responses and language skills.

Symptoms vary dependant on the type. Changes in behaviour or personality may be noticed. The person may lose meaning or understanding of some words or speech may become slow and require a lot of effort.

Korsakoffs syndrome:

This is associated with heavy drinking over a long period of time.

Symptoms may include memory loss and a change in personality. This type is not certain to get worse over time and may be halted if the person abstains from alcohol.

More information can be found on Alzheimer Society website:
alzheimers.org.uk