

## What is Dementia?

Dementia is the term used for a number of conditions whose symptoms affect memory and other functions such as language, problem solving, thinking and behaviour. For a diagnosis of dementia to be made these difficulties need to impact on a person's everyday functioning, and any other causes for these changes need to have been ruled out.

Everyone with dementia is unique and symptoms affect people differently. Symptoms are progressive, meaning they gradually worsen over time.

### Symptoms may include:

- Memory impairment – for example, forgetting recent events, missing appointments
- Language disturbance, such as forgetting words or using incorrect words
- Difficulty recognising or identifying objects- for example putting washing up liquid in the fridge
- Trouble with organising, planning and judgement – for example difficulty with problem solving or cooking a meal
- Visuospatial and motor skills such as judging distances and physical coordination
- Changes in mood and behaviour –for example becoming withdrawn and apathetic.

### What causes dementia?

There are many different causes of dementia, the following are the most common:

- **Alzheimer's disease**  
This accounts for about two thirds of all cases of dementia and is characterised by the presence of amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles in the brain that together disrupt the sending and receiving of chemical messengers in the brain. Initial symptoms may include difficulty with memory, word finding and problem solving
- **Vascular dementia**  
When the blood supply to the brain is reduced or blocked this causes brain cells to be damaged or die reducing in changes to brain functioning. These changes can occur as a result of many tiny blockages over an extended period of time or because of a single large event such as a stroke. Symptoms will relate to the particular part of the brain which has been affected by the vascular damage
- **Dementia with Lewy bodies**  
Lewy bodies are abnormal proteins that form within brain cells disrupting the brain chemistry and leading to cell death. Early changes include fluctuating levels of alertness, difficulties with movement, attention and spatial awareness and sometimes hallucinations. Dementia with Lewy bodies has commonalities with Parkinson's disease.
- **Frontotemporal dementia**  
This occurs as a result of damage to the frontal and/or temporal lobes of the brain caused by abnormal proteins and often affects people in their 50s and 60s. Depending on the location of the damage initial symptoms can include changes in personality and behaviour or difficulty with speech and understanding language.

## **Who gets dementia?**

While there are known risk factors and protective factors associated with developing dementia there are no guarantees as to who will or won't develop dementia.

Dementia becomes more common as people grow older. It is estimated that approximately 60 000 New Zealanders have dementia. About 1 in 100 people in their 60s are estimated to be affected and 1 in 3 people over the age of 90. The number of people living with dementia is expected to rise sharply in the next few decades as our growing ageing population lives longer. Increased knowledge about dementia also means some people are being diagnosed earlier in the disease process.

It is estimated that over 3 000 New Zealanders under the age of 65 years have dementia.

## **What is the treatment for dementia?**

There is no cure for dementia but there are medications available that may help some people, for some time, to function better than they otherwise would. One of these, Donepezil is subsidised by Pharmac. Talking therapies like counselling can also help people to come to terms with the changes that a diagnosis of dementia brings and the feelings that can arise.

Much of the treatment of dementia is social rather than medical. If you have dementia or are supporting someone with dementia it is important to maintain interests, social contacts, self-esteem and purpose in life. When people with dementia are encouraged to remain as independent as possible in their activities of daily living, their quality of life is better. Exercise and a healthy diet are also important factors in living well with dementia.

The majority of people with dementia live in the community. With good support, people with dementia can continue to live full and meaningful lives.

## **Early warning signs of dementia**

The brain changes that are thought to cause dementia may have been slowly building up for many years, even decades, before a person begins to show clinical symptoms. Early signs can be vague and not immediately obvious. Given that there can be some age related changes in memory this can cause people to become concerned they have dementia. Occasionally forgetting a friend's name or losing your keys does not mean you have dementia.

However, anyone who is worried about noticeable changes in their memory or other related symptoms are advised to discuss their concerns with a G.P. This ensures other causes for these changes can be treated where appropriate. Brain functioning can be affected by many things including stress, grief, depression and physical illnesses. If the symptoms are a result of dementia then an early diagnosis can provide access to medications, support and information.

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