

# About dementia

**This help sheet is about dementia and some of its most common forms. It describes early symptoms and the importance of speaking with a doctor to investigate any changes to memory, thinking or behaviour.**

- Dementia describes a collection of symptoms caused by disorders affecting the brain. It is not one specific disease.
- Dementia can affect thinking, memory and behaviour. Brain function is affected enough to interfere with someone's normal social or working life.
- No two people experience dementia in the same way.
- It is essential to get a medical diagnosis when symptoms first appear.
- People often lead active and fulfilling lives for many years after their diagnosis.

## Signs and symptoms of dementia

Early signs of dementia can be subtle and may not be immediately obvious.

Common symptoms include:

- memory loss
- changes in planning and problem-solving abilities
- difficulty completing everyday tasks
- confusion about time or place
- trouble understanding what we see (objects, people) and distances, depth and space in our surroundings
- difficulty with speech, writing or comprehension
- misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps

- decreased or poor judgement
- withdrawal from work or social activities
- changes in mood and personality.

## **Diagnosing dementia**

A number of conditions produce symptoms similar to dementia. These can often be treated. They include some vitamin and hormone deficiencies, depression, medication effects, infections and brain tumours.

It is essential to talk to your doctor when symptoms first appear. If you feel comfortable, take a relative or friend with you.

If the symptoms are caused by dementia, an early diagnosis means early access to support, information and, if it is available, medication.

If symptoms are not caused by dementia, early diagnosis will be helpful to treat other conditions.

## **Who gets dementia**

Dementia can happen to anybody, but the risk increases with age.

It depends on a combination of age, genes, health and lifestyle.

- Over the age of 65, dementia affects almost one person in 10.
- Over the age of 85, dementia affects three people in 10.
- People under the age of 65 can develop dementia (called ‘younger onset dementia’), but it is less common.
- Dementia can sometimes be hereditary, but this is quite rare.

Dementia is not a normal part of ageing.

## **What causes dementia**

Many different conditions can cause dementia. In most cases, why people develop dementia is unknown.

## **Common forms of dementia**

### **Alzheimer's disease**

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia. This condition disrupts the brain's neurons. It affects how they work and communicate with each other. A decrease of important chemicals stops messages travelling normally through the brain. It causes a gradual decline in cognitive abilities (when someone's thinking is affected), often beginning with memory loss, and progresses to changes to thinking and behaviour.

### **Vascular dementia**

Vascular dementia occurs when there is reduced blood supply to the brain, causing cells to die. This can be the result of a single large stroke, several smaller strokes, or vascular disease in the small blood vessels deep within the brain. The symptoms vary depending on the location and size of brain damage. It may affect one or a few specific cognitive functions.

### **Lewy body disease**

In Lewy body disease, tiny structures called Lewy bodies can be seen inside dying brain cells. The proteins within these structures disrupt the way the brain functions, causing changes in movement, thinking and behaviour. Lewy body disease is considered as a spectrum disease. The conditions in the spectrum are dementia with Lewy bodies, Parkinson's disease and Parkinson's disease dementia.

### **Frontotemporal dementia**

Frontotemporal dementia causes progressive damage to either or both the frontal or temporal lobes of the brain. Symptoms depend on which areas of the brain are damaged. Early symptoms affecting the frontal lobe are often behavioural symptoms and personality changes. Early symptoms affecting the temporal lobe involve changes to language skills (speech and comprehension).

Memory often remains unaffected, especially in the early stages of the condition. Frontotemporal dementia is more commonly diagnosed in people under the age of 65.

## Seeking support

Dementia is progressive. Symptoms often begin slowly and gradually worsen over time.

There is no known cure for dementia. There are healthcare professionals, medications and other therapies that can help with some symptoms, and support you to look after your health and wellbeing.

Support is vital for people living with dementia. The help of families, friends and carers can make a positive difference to managing the condition and living well.

## Additional reading and resources

- **Help sheets about common forms of dementia**

Visit: [dementia.org.au/help-sheets](https://dementia.org.au/help-sheets)

- **Dementia Australia library service**

Visit: [dementia.org.au/library](https://dementia.org.au/library)

- **Dementia Australia support services and programs**

Visit: [dementia.org.au/support](https://dementia.org.au/support)

- **Dementia Australia education**

Visit: [dementia.org.au/education](https://dementia.org.au/education)

## Further information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling.

**National Dementia Helpline: 1800 100 500**

**For language assistance: 131 450**

**Visit our website: [dementia.org.au](https://dementia.org.au)**