

November 2014 • Facts

Dementia

Facts about dementia

- Dementia is *not* a part of normal aging.
- Risk of dementia increases as we age.
- 65-year-olds have a 17% to 20% risk of getting dementia during the rest of their life.¹
- Treatment can reverse signs of dementia 9% of the time.¹

Facts about Alzheimer disease

- Alzheimer disease causes 60% to 80% of all dementia cases.²
- Men and women have the same risk of getting Alzheimer disease. More women have it though, because women tend to live longer.
- 65-year-olds have a 9% to 17% risk of getting Alzheimer disease during their life.¹
- Every 67 seconds, another American gets Alzheimer's disease.¹
- The risk of getting Alzheimer disease doubles if you have a 1st degree relative with it.³

What is dementia?

Dementia is a term used to refer to a group of symptoms. These symptoms are linked to memory loss and a decrease in thinking skills. They keep the person from being able to do simple tasks of daily living. And they get worse over time—either slowly or quickly. The symptoms are seen mostly in people over 65.

Dementia is also known as cognitive impairment.

Not just Alzheimer disease

Alzheimer disease is the most common cause of dementia. But there are many other causes. Some are treatable, and some are not. Unfortunately, the 3 most common causes are not treatable.



Is it dementia or a “senior moment?”

As we age, we become more forgetful. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between a senior moment and dementia. These things might help.

Signs of a senior moment

- Temporarily forget a name, phone number, PIN, etc.
- Occasionally forget an appointment, but remember it afterwards
- Sometimes misplace keys or other items
- Forget what you were going to get when you went into a room
- Lists and other memory aids keep you on track
- Not worried about memory loss

Signs of dementia

- Often forget names, phone numbers, PIN, etc.
- Often forget appointments and not remember them afterwards
- Often misplace keys or other items or forget what an item is used for
- Tend to forget recent things but remember things from the past

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Facts

Treatable and untreatable causes of dementia

Treatment for these causes might be able to reverse the signs of dementia:

- Combinations of different drugs
- Drug and/or alcohol abuse
- Not enough folate in the diet
- Low blood sugar
- Underactive thyroid
- Too much fluid in the brain caused by an infection, head injury, tumor, or stroke
- Severe depression (false dementia)
- Blood that collects between the brain and its outer covering
- Various kidney, liver, and lung diseases
- Not enough vitamin B12 in the diet

Treatment for these causes won't reverse the signs of dementia:

- Alzheimer disease
- Multiple small strokes (vascular cognitive impairment)
- Frontotemporal dementia (Pick disease)
- Lewy body dementia
- AIDS dementia complex
- Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease
- Huntington disease
- Parkinson disease

Dementia diagnosis

Diagnosis starts with the primary care doctor. Primary care doctors:

- Identify any risk factors the person might have
- Look for signs of dementia
- Document any signs reported by the person and his/her family member or friend

If any of this makes the doctor think the person might have dementia, the doctor does a more formal test of the person. This is a structured questionnaire. If the doctor still thinks the person might have dementia after this, he/she sends the person to a neurologist.

Signs of dementia (continued)

- Unable to learn new things
- Hard to manage daily affairs like balancing a checkbook or paying bills
- Worried about memory loss or have no awareness of it
- Family and friends notice memory lapses or other symptoms

To screen or not to screen for dementia

The Affordable Care Act calls for screening as part of the annual wellness visit for Medicare patients.⁴ The Alzheimer's Association has provided guidelines for doing this.⁵

The neurologist does a complete evaluation that includes a neurological exam, laboratory tests, and a brain scan. This helps the neurologist find out if the person actually has dementia. It also helps find out the cause of the dementia. Once that is known, the doctor will know whether treatment might be able to reverse the signs of the dementia.

How the laboratory can help

Laboratory tests are very important for finding the cause. They include:

- Blood tests for calcium, CBC, B12, folate, glucose, kidney function, liver function, and TSH
- Blood testing to detect certain types of infection
- Cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) testing for amyloid beta 1-42, tau and p-tau proteins, and 14-3-3 protein
- Blood testing for genetic changes in the *APOE*, *APP*, *C9orf7*, *GRN*, *MAPT 2*, *PS-1 (PSEN1)*, and *PS-2 (PSEN2)* genes

References

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5. Cordell CB, Borson S, Boustani M, et al. Alzheimer's Association recommendations for operationalizing the detection of cognitive impairment during the Medicare Annual Wellness Visit in a primary care setting. *Alzheimers Dement.* 2013;9:141-150.