

## What is dementia?

*Dementia* is a disorder in which a previously normal brain does not function normally and the affected person becomes confused, forgetful and out of touch with the real world. It is rare in people under 65 years of age and appears more likely to develop with increasing age. It tends to progress slowly after it develops. The cause is not always known, but dementia can follow brain damage from physical abuse such as boxing, excessive alcohol and other drugs, and hardening of the arteries to the brain. There is a genetic tendency to early dementia in some families.

## What is Alzheimer's disease?

This refers to a special type of dementia in which there is wasting of some brain cells, the cause of which is uncertain. It can occur at any age, but when it develops at a relatively young age (under 65) it is referred to as *presenile dementia*. It is more common in people with Down syndrome.

## What are the symptoms?

The main feature is *loss of memory* of things that have happened *recently*. You will notice that the person cannot remember what has happened a few hours (or even moments) earlier but can clearly remember events in the past. Other symptoms, which are slowly progressive, include:

- apathy and loss of initiative
- confusion and restlessness
- a tendency to wander
- poor powers of reasoning and understanding
- loss of interest in previously enjoyable things
- sleeping problems
- misplacing things
- problems with language (e.g. finding the right word)
- difficulty performing familiar tasks
- disorientation in time and place
- poor or decreased judgment (e.g. driving)
- problems with abstract thinking (e.g. balancing a cheque book)
- personality changes, such as being suspicious, irritable, withdrawn, humourless, uncooperative or aggressive.

The problem occasionally results in marked emotional and physical instability. It is sad and difficult for relatives to watch their loved ones develop aggressive and antisocial behaviour, such as poor table manners, poor personal cleanliness, rudeness and a lack of interest in others. Sometimes severe problems such as violent behaviour, sexual promiscuity and incontinence will eventuate.

## How is it diagnosed?

A correct diagnosis is very important and the doctor will refer the problem to a specialist or specialist clinic for special tests.

## How common is dementia?

The older the person, the more likely the problem. The incidence is probably about 1 person in 10 over 65 years and 1 in 5 over 80 years.

## What are the risks?

There is always the likelihood of accidents with household items such as fire, gas, kitchen knives and hot water. Accidents at the toilet, in the bath and when crossing roads may be a problem, especially if dementia is combined with failing sight and hearing. Such people should not drive motor vehicles.

Without proper supervision they are likely to eat poorly, neglect their bodies and develop medical problems such as skin ulcers and infections. They can also suffer from malnutrition and incontinence of urine or faeces.

## What is the treatment?

If you suspect that a friend or relative has early dementia, take him or her to the doctor for assessment. If they will not cooperate, contact the Aged Care Assessment Team. There is no cure, but some modern drugs may delay the progression of dementia. There is evidence that the delay is modest—in the order of 6 to 12 months. Ask your doctor about this. However, the best that can be offered is tender loving care.

Regular home visits by caring, sympathetic people are important. Such people include relatives, friends, general practitioners, district nurses, home help, ministers of religion and Meals-on-Wheels. The sufferers tend to manage much better in the familiar surroundings of their own home.

Special attention should be paid to organising memory aids such as lists, routines and medication, and to hygiene, diet and warmth. Adequate nutrition, including vitamin supplements if necessary, has been shown to help these people.

## Support groups

It is important to contact an Alzheimer's support group in your state or locality. One such special support and advisory group is called ADARDS (the Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Society).