

Facts

The term “dementia” refers to a group of symptoms that are caused by changes in brain function. People with dementia may seem forgetful or confused. They may ask the same questions repeatedly, get lost in familiar places, and neglect personal safety, hygiene and nutrition.

In the past, memory loss and confusion were considered a normal part of aging. However, scientists now know that most people remain alert and able as they age, although it may take longer to remember things.

The two most common forms of dementia in older people are Alzheimer’s disease and “multi-infarct dementia” (sometimes called vascular dementia). These types of dementia cannot be cured.

It is estimated that 2-4% of people over age 65 years have dementia of the Alzheimer’s type, with other types being much less common. The risk of developing dementia increases with age, particularly after age 75 years. It is estimated that 20% or more may develop dementia over age 85 years.

Signs & Symptoms

In Alzheimer’s disease, nerve cell changes in certain parts of the brain result in the death of a large number of cells. Symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease begin slowly and become steadily worse. As the disease progresses, symptoms range from mild forgetfulness to serious impairments in thinking, judgment, and the ability to perform daily activities. Eventually, the person with Alzheimer’s disease may need total care.

In multi-infarct dementia, a series of small strokes or changes in the brain’s blood supply may result in the death of brain tissue. The

location in the brain where the small strokes occur determines the seriousness of the problem and the symptoms which arise. Symptoms that begin suddenly may be a sign of this kind of dementia. People with multi-infarct dementia are likely to show signs of improvement or remain stable for long periods of time, then quickly develop new symptoms if more strokes occur. In many people with this type of dementia, high blood pressure is to blame. One of the most important reasons to control high blood pressure is to prevent strokes.

Causes

Dementia is caused by many conditions. Some conditions that cause dementia can be reversed, and others cannot. Also, many different medical conditions may cause symptoms that seem like Alzheimer’s disease, but are not. Some of these medical conditions may be treatable. Reversible conditions can be caused by a high fever, dehydration, vitamin deficiency and poor nutrition, bad reactions to medicines, problems with the thyroid gland, or a minor head injury. Medical conditions like these can be serious and should be treated by a doctor as soon as possible.

While scientists are learning more about Alzheimer’s disease every day, the cause is still unknown.

Treatment

Even if the doctor diagnoses an irreversible form of dementia, much can still be done to treat the person and help the family cope.

For some people in the early and middle stages of Alzheimer’s disease, certain medications may be prescribed to help delay the worsening of some of the disease’s symptoms. For people with multi-infarct dementia, it is

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very important to try to prevent future strokes by controlling high blood pressure, monitoring and treating high blood cholesterol and diabetes, and not smoking.

Many people with dementia need no medication for behavioral problems. But for some, doctors may prescribe medications to reduce agitation, anxiety, depression, or sleeping problems.

Helping Someone Else

Family members and friends can assist people with dementia in continuing their daily routines, physical activities, and social contacts. By talking about events and daily activities, they can help reinforce mental abilities.

Memory aids may help in the day-to-day living of people in the earlier stages of dementia. Some families find that a big calendar, a list of daily plans, notes about simple safety measures, and written directions describing how to use common household items are very useful aids. Lists and alarm clocks can also help remind the person of important times and events.

Caring for a person with dementia at home is a difficult job and can become overwhelming at times. Caregivers themselves often are at increased risk for depression and illness, especially if they do not receive adequate support from family, friends and the community.

One of the biggest struggles caregivers face is dealing with the difficult behaviors of the person they are caring for. Dressing, bathing, eating (basic activities of daily living) often become difficult to manage for the person with dementia and the caregiver. Having a plan for getting through the day can help caregivers cope.

Families often need information about community resources, such as home care, adult day care, respite programs, and nursing homes. This information may be found through local and state programs such as the Area Agency on Aging. For help in finding the appropriate agency in your area, call the Eldercare Locator, toll-free, at 800-677-1116. To find local service providers, also check your yellow pages.

Sources:

Diagnostic Statistical Manual, 4th Edition (DSM-IV)

National Institute of Mental Health

National Institute on Aging

Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center

For more information contact

Northern Lakes Community Mental Health

1-800-492-5742

(231) 922-4850

National Institute of Mental Health

www.nimh.nih.gov

(800) 421-4211 (depression info)

(888) 826-9438 (anxiety info)

(301) 443-4513 (other info)

Mental Health America

www.nmha.org

(800) 969-6642

Alzheimer's Association

(800) 272-3900

www.alz.org

Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center

(800) 438-4380

www.alzheimers.org

National Institute on Aging

www.nia.nih.gov