

Cognitive Impairment in the Elderly

A GUIDE FOR PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA AND THEIR CAREGIVERS

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What is dementia?

Dementia is a health condition that gradually causes a person to lose their ability to remember, learn and speak with others. Over time, a person with dementia will have increasing difficulty thinking, making decisions, and carrying out daily activities. Scientists and physicians are learning more about this condition all the time.

The most common type of dementia is caused by the loss of brain cells; other forms of dementia are caused by damage to the brain's blood vessels. A brain injury, stroke or a series of mini strokes affect the flow of blood in the brain and can lead to the development of dementia.

From time to time, all people forget things for a while and then remember them later, and it is normal for this to increase slightly as we get older. This is not dementia. People with dementia not only forget important information, but they also have a limited ability to learn and recall new things and to make sound decisions.

What are the signs of dementia?

There are some common signs of early dementia. It is important to remember these signs are different from normal changes due to aging. Not everyone who has dementia will have all the signs listed below. These are only examples of possible signs of dementia.

COMMON SIGNS OF DEMENTIA*

- **Loss of short term memory**

Asking the same question over and over within a matter of minutes

- **Misplacing items**

Placing an iron in the freezer or a wristwatch in the sugar bowl, for example

- **Difficulty with familiar tasks**

Cooking a meal but forgetting to serve it or forgetting how to make a familiar dish

- **Mood swings**

Acting out of character by quickly changing from being calm to crying to angry within minutes

- **Problems communicating**

Patients often cannot remember the right word to use, or use the wrong word in a sentence

- **Personality changes**

A calm, quiet person drastically changing to someone who may be irritable, suspicious or fearful

- **Time and place disorientation**

Getting lost in familiar places and being unable to get home again

- **Lack of judgment**

Forgetting to eat dinner or walk the dog, acting without consideration of the consequences

- **Problems with abstract thinking**

Forgetting what numbers are, or how to add, subtract, multiply or divide

You may be feeling a sense of fear, confusion or anger about seeing signs of early dementia in yourself or a loved one. These feelings are normal. Don't let your emotions hold you back from seeking valuable information and support that will help you handle the changes that will occur as time progresses.

*Source: Alzheimer Society of Canada

Who gets dementia?

The chance of developing dementia increases as you get older. Although dementia is more common in people age 65 and older, it can occur earlier in life. Dementia is a disease; it is not a normal part of aging.

Approximately 8% of the Canadian population over 65 has some form of dementia and 35% of Canadians over 85 show signs of dementia. In British Columbia, it is estimated that between 51,000 and 64,000 people may currently have some form of dementia and that for every 1,000 males over the age of 65, 49 of them have dementia, while for every 1,000 females over the age of 65, 70 of them have some form of dementia.

Dementia appears to be somewhat hereditary, as it tends to develop often in people with a family history of the disease. However, having a parent with dementia does not guarantee you will also develop dementia. It is not contagious. It cannot be transmitted by touch or by sharing an item with a person living with dementia.

Diagnosing dementia

If you recognize some of the signs of dementia in yourself or a loved one, a visit to a family doctor is the most important next step. A family doctor will talk with you about your concerns and ask questions to get more information about your memory, your ability to reason and any problems you may be having with speech or day-to-day function. This information will help your doctor to make a diagnosis and to determine the source of the underlying cause of the symptoms you or your loved one are experiencing. There are some conditions that can cause dementia that may respond well to treatment, such as:

- depression
- medication interactions
- infections
- thyroid or heart disease
- alcohol dependency
- poor nutrition (not enough to eat or drink)

It is important to find out the cause of the symptoms as early as possible because this will mean proper care, treatment and support, and it will give you time to plan for the future.

What is the difference between dementia and Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's disease is one form of dementia. There are numerous types of dementia, but Alzheimer's disease is the most common and best known. About 60% to 70% of all people with dementia have Alzheimer's disease alone or in combination with other forms of dementia, such as Vascular Dementia (small strokes). Some other less common forms of dementia that you may have heard of include: Lewy Body Dementia, Pick's Disease, Parkinson's Disease, and Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease.

Is there a cure for dementia?

There is currently no cure for dementia. However, there are medications that can improve symptoms and delay progress of the condition in some individuals for a time, but not indefinitely. Other medications may help manage anxiety, depression and behavioural symptoms. New classes of drugs are in development. It is important to discuss your own expectations for treatment as well as the risks and benefits of any medications with your doctor prior to making any decisions about treatment. Caregivers are in a position to monitor symptoms and general health status and should be included as partners in treatment planning.

Preventing dementia

Currently there is no scientific evidence that dementia can be prevented. However, there are many things you can do that will help to keep your memory sharp and your day-to-day functioning at an independent level.

1. Properly control related diseases: If you have high blood pressure, diabetes or other risk factors for blood vessel disease, make sure that you follow medical advice
2. Avoid excess alcohol and drugs: Excess consumption of alcohol or recreational drugs is harmful to your health
3. Keep your mind active: Do crossword puzzles, read the newspaper, play a musical instrument
4. Stay physically active: Go for walks, take a dance class, join a gym, go swimming or cycling
5. Maintain a balanced diet: Eat healthy, nutritious meals with adequate vitamin intake

Living with dementia

A person with dementia can live for many years after developing the first symptoms of this illness. Most people with dementia continue to live in their

home after they are diagnosed with the help of family members, close friends and professional caregivers. Staying active and connected to family, friends and interests are important to the health and well-being of a person with dementia. As the disease progresses, it may become too difficult to provide care at home, and the person living with dementia may need to move to a long-term care facility. This decision should be made jointly between the caregivers and a family doctor.

Planning ahead

You may have questions about what is happening to you or you may feel anxious about the future.

Questions may include:

1. Will my family understand what is happening to me?
2. Do I have to stop driving?
3. Do I have a living will?
4. Are my financial affairs in order?

Talk to your family doctor. Learning about dementia helps family members or other caregivers handle the changes caused by dementia. Plan to discuss your options and any questions you may have with your physician.

Many people make financial plans for the future, but it is also important to plan now for the health care needs you may have in the future.

Adults in British Columbia can record their health care wishes and legal and financial decisions in writing. These documents, called Health Care Directives or Living Wills, speak for you if you become unable to

communicate this information on your own. Consider discussing this option with a loved one in the early stages of dementia, if possible. It is a good idea to speak with a lawyer or a notary public when preparing these documents to ensure they meet legal standards.

You may also want to consider writing a representation agreement to appoint a health representative. Your representative can legally make health care decisions on your behalf. It is important to discuss your decisions with your doctor so he or she knows if you have a document or an appointed health representative.

For families of those recently diagnosed with dementia

(From *First Steps for Families of Those Recently Diagnosed with Alzheimer Disease* www.alzheimer.ca/english/resources/as-publications.htm)

1. Learn as much as you feel you can
2. Recognize that the disease affects the person's abilities
3. Don't lose sight of the person
4. Explore treatment options
5. Recognize that you are going through a variety of emotions
6. Plan for the future
7. Recognize that caregiving can take its toll
8. Seek out help
9. Develop a support network
10. Be aware that the Alzheimer Society is available to help people with dementia of all kinds and their caregivers

Resources

Alzheimer Society of BC

Telephone: 604 681-6530 or toll free: 1 800 667-3742

Web site: www.alzheimerbc.org

Alzheimer Society Safely Home™ -Alzheimer Wandering Registry: Forms available at local offices of the Alzheimer Society of Canada or

Web site: www.alzheimer.ca

Telephone: 1 800 616-8816.

British Columbia Medical Association – Building bridges: A call for a coordinated dementia strategy in British Columbia (2004).

Web site: http://www.bcma.org/public/patient_advocacy/Building%20Bridges.pdf

British Columbia Medical Association – *Dementia: Straight talk from your doctor*
(brochure produced May 2005).

The BC Coalition to Eliminate Abuse of Seniors (BC CEAS) provides information, training, community development and materials on abuse and neglect of seniors to individuals, community agencies and organizations. The society also offers information on services and support groups available to seniors who have experienced abuse.

Telephone: (Lower Mainland) 604 437-1940; Toll free 1 866 437-1940
Address: BC CEAS 304 5050 Kingsway Street, Burnaby, B.C. V5H 4C2
Web site: www.bcceas.ca

BC Senior's Guide – available through the Ministry of Community Services in English, French, Punjabi and Chinese.

Web site: www.cserv.gov.bc.ca/seniors

Representation Agreement Resource Centre

Telephone: 604 408-7414
Web site: www.rarc.ca

Clinic for Alzheimer Disease and Related Disorders, UBC

Telephone: 604 822-7031
Web site: www.vch.ca/alz

Victorian Order of Nurses, Respite Care

Telephone: 1 877 430-3109
Web site: www.von.ca

BC's Chronic Disease Management Program

Telephone: 1 800 465-4911 (Health Information Line)
Web site: www.health.gov.bc.ca/cdm

Home and Community Care, BC Ministry of Health

Telephone: Contact your regional health authority
Web site: www.health.gov.bc.ca/hcc

Children's, Women's and Senior's Branch, BC Ministry of Health

Telephone: 1 800 465-4911 (Health Information Line)
Web site: www.health.gov.bc.ca/seniors

Clinical Practice Guidelines and Protocols in British Columbia

Telephone: 250 952-1347
Web site: www.BCGuidelines.ca

BC Health Guide

Telephone: 1 800 465-4911
Web site: www.bchealthguide.org

BC NurseLine

Telephone: 1 866 215-4700
Web site: www.bchealthguide.org/nurseline.stm



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