



About Dementia

Dementia especially Alzheimer's disease is increasing in incidence among people age 65 and older. It currently represents a major health problem for the United States because of its impact on individuals, families, healthcare, and our society as a whole. Experts estimate that 4 million people currently suffer with the disease. In Columbia County over 1000 people have Alzheimer's or related dementias.

In light of these facts if you or someone you love or provide medical care for has dementia; the following information may be helpful.

What is Dementia?

It is a gradual loss of mental abilities. Dementia is marked by changes in memory, personality, behavior, and thinking abilities. Dementia is not a disease itself but rather a group of symptoms that are caused by other conditions or diseases.

Dementia develops when parts of the brain that are involved with learning, memory, decision-making, and language are affected by infection or disease. The most common cause of dementia is Alzheimer's disease but there may be as many as 100 other potential causes.

Why Should I Learn About Dementia?

Dementia touches the lives of millions of Americans. People with dementia often struggle just to get through each day. They may lose the ability to do simple things like dressing, cooking or living independently. Family, friends, and caregivers often must provide emotional and physical support. Learning and understanding what dementia is can help you cope with a family member who has it or to help you provide the best possible healthcare to your patients.

What Causes Dementia?

There are several causes behind the development of dementia. Some of them include:

- Central Nervous System diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's**
- Multi-infarct Dementia caused by multiple strokes in the brain**
- Alcohol or drug overuse**
- Nutritional conditions such as vitamin deficiencies**
- Infections in the central nervous system like AIDS**



Head injuries

Accumulation of fluid in the brain from tumors or injuries

Alzheimer's disease accounts for 50-70% of all dementias. In addition to this Lewy Body disease and Pick's disease are becoming much more common as causes of dementia.

Who is at Risk for Dementia?

Dementia is considered a disease of late life. This means dementia is less common in young adults and middle-aged people. About 8% of all people over the age of 65 have some type of dementia and that number doubles every five years above that age. It is important to remember that dementia is not a normal sign of aging.

Is Dementia treatable?

Fortunately, many conditions that cause dementia can be treated and reversed. Listed below are some examples of conditions that cause dementias that can be treated:

Long-term drug abuse

Brain tumors either malignant or non-malignant

Hematoma-blood swelling in the brain

Metabolic disorders like vitamin B12 deficiency

Hypothyroidism or a non-functioning thyroid gland

Some non-curable conditions that cause dementia include:

Alzheimer's disease

Multi-infarct dementia

Parkinson's disease

AIDS

What are the Signs & Symptoms of Dementia?

Most symptoms progress slowly over several years. Often symptoms go unnoticed by family and friends especially in the early stages. Many people after the diagnosis has been made look back and realize that symptoms were happening for years before the healthcare provider was contacted.

Common signs & symptoms include:

Forgetfulness

Trouble learning new things
Disorientation
Confusion
Misplacing things
Trouble doing familiar tasks
Changes in personality or behavior
Poor judgment
Unable to follow directions
Word finding problems
Visual problems
Withdrawal or loss of motivation
Trouble sleeping

It is important to visit a healthcare provider if you or someone you love has any of these symptoms so you can be properly evaluated and treated. Many conditions that are not dementia can cause similar problems.

Getting a Diagnosis of Dementia

It is important to get a complete evaluation by your healthcare provider. Certain tests and procedures can be performed to help determine if you or a loved one has dementia. Even though dementia is common it often goes unrecognized or misdiagnosed. Also healthcare providers and caregivers can sometimes mistakenly view the early symptoms of dementia as normal aging.

An early and accurate diagnosis of dementia and its cause is very important for the following reasons:

To rule out Alzheimer's
To identify treatable conditions and begin treatment right away
To identify Alzheimer's at the earliest stage so the patient and family has time to plan for future needs and start medication to slow progression

The following is usually included in an evaluation for dementia:

Personal Medical History
Family Medical History
Information about what brought them in to be seen

Blood and urine tests
Electrocardiogram-EKG
Electroencephalogram-EEG
Cat Scan of the brain
Chest x-ray
Mini Mental Status Exam and other tests for memory and thinking skills
Complete physical and mental health exam

All of these tests and exams will help the healthcare provider determine what could be causing the symptoms of dementia and if these symptoms come from treatable and reversible conditions.

How is Dementia Treated?

There are several different treatment options depending on the type and cause of the dementia. Medications, surgery or even counseling may be needed to help deal with the problem. Your healthcare provider will determine the best treatment for you or your loved one based on many factors including:

Your age, overall health, and medical condition
Your tolerance for medications and therapies
Your choices or preferences

Common medications used to treat dementia:

Tacrine(Cognex)

This drug works by slowing down the loss of specific helpful chemicals in the brain. It does not cure dementia but may help keep it from getting worse.

Donepezil(Aricept)

This is the most widely used medication for dementia. It acts the same as Tacrine but may have fewer side effects.

Rivastigmine(Exelon)

This is a new generation of drugs that also help keep certain needed chemicals from being lost in the brain. Again this is not a cure but a way to help slow down the progression of symptoms.



Galantamine(Reminyl)

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Other medications are used to treat the symptoms of dementia such as depression and agitation.

Antipsychotics

These medications may be helpful in treating paranoia, agitation, and confusion. These do have side effects and patients need to be monitored for any problems.

Anti-anxiety

These medications may be helpful with resistive or combative behaviors.

Antidepressants

Often depression accompanies dementia. These medications can improve mood and help with motivation.

There is research being done on a few promising new drugs that may help reduce the symptoms and slow progression of the dementia. You should talk with your healthcare provider about what is new in treatment therapies.

