

What You Should Know About Dementia

Dementia is not a disease—it is a group of symptoms that indicate changes in brain activity. Most people think of Alzheimer disease when they think of dementia, but Alzheimer's is only 1 of about 60 causes of dementia. Dementia is not a definite part of growing older, and many dementias can be delayed or avoided altogether by making some changes in your medical or personal routine. It may be worth trying some of these approaches to help reduce any chance of developing dementia as you age.

What is dementia?

Dementia is not a single disease, but a word used to describe symptoms caused by damage to or changes in the brain, usually but not always affecting people older than age 65. The most common first sign of dementia is cognitive ("thinking") loss, usually failure of memory. Memory loss can worsen over time, from simply forgetting someone's name to more serious slips, like forgetting to turn off the car engine or feeling lost in your own neighborhood. Dementia may cause problems with finding words to explain thoughts, or trouble in making judgments—like what to do in an emergency. People with dementia may have problems concentrating or difficulty carrying out regular activities such as cooking or balancing a checkbook. They may forget to maintain personal care (eg, brushing their teeth), or begin to show personality changes like becoming suspicious or violent. Over time, some people lose interest in life so that they do not leave home or participate in the activities they used to love.

Although some cases of dementia are caused by major health problems that can cause permanent brain damage—like stroke or brain tumor—other causes can be treated. Many people have mild cognitive changes, an early stage at which symptoms like memory loss or slowed thinking are not bad enough to be dementia. These changes may be worse than expected for that age, and then continue to worsen until dementia occurs. It may be possible in some cases, however, to take steps to slow or prevent worsening of the cognitive problems.

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Some treatable causes of dementia

In certain people, dementia may be caused by poor diet or disease. Not getting enough of the proper vitamins may lead to poor brain function. Some diseases that can cause changes in the brain that can lead to dementia are high cholesterol, diabetes, high blood pressure, and



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thyroid problems. Additionally, some researchers have found that smoking, drinking too much alcohol, or using certain drugs may cause dementia.

Trying to delay or prevent dementia

It is wise to stop smoking and limit alcoholic drinks in order to lower the chance you will develop dementia. A proper and well-balanced diet, including necessary vitamins and nutrients, is important for good brain health. Regular exercise (30 minutes, 5 times per week) can help improve cognitive activity, as well.

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Statin drugs, which lower blood cholesterol, have slowed cognitive damage in some studies, and patients with diabetes who have good control over their blood glucose level seem to have better brain function than those whose glucose level changes. There are drugs available to slow worsening of Alzheimer disease and some other types of dementia.

Medicines like aspirin are also being studied as a way to reduce risk for some types of dementia. In addition, some vitamins and supplements like vitamin E, vitamin C, beta carotene, and ginkgo biloba may delay or prevent cognitive slowing. You

should also keep an active social life, read a lot, and continue hobbies and games.

See your doctor

If you are worried about symptoms that might suggest dementia, your health care provider may be able to help by performing tests and asking questions to see if you have memory loss or slowed thinking. The physician may then prescribe treatments to help brain function. If these do not work, you will need to visit a specialist for more testing to find the specific cause of your symptoms.

RESOURCES

Alzheimer's Disease Association

www.alz.org

Tel: 1-800-272-3900

TTY: 1-866-403-3073

Dementia Advocacy and Support Network (DASN International)

www.dasninternational.org

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

www.nimh.nih.gov/topics/alzheimers-disease.shtml

Tel: 301-443-4513/866-615-NIMH (-6464)

TTY: 301-443-8431

National Institute on Aging

www.nih.gov/nia

Tel: (301) 496-1752

TTY: 1-800-222-4225