PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Dementia

This information explains what dementia is. It also describes some of its common symptoms and how it can be treated.

About Dementia

Dementia is the loss of brain functions, such as memory, thinking, and reasoning. When your brain loses some of its functions, it stops working like it should. This gets in the way of your daily functions and makes it hard for you to do your normal activities. Dementia is caused by damage to nerve cells in the brain.

Dementia by itself is not a disease. It's a word used to describe a wide range of symptoms caused by different diseases or health problems. There are different types of dementia. The most common type of dementia is Alzheimer's (ALTS-hy-mers) disease.

Dementia often happens slowly over time and is more common in older adults. But it's not a normal part of aging. Many people grow old and do not have dementia.

Symptoms of Dementia

The symptoms (signs) of dementia are not the same for everyone, but some common symptoms are:

- Trouble remembering things, such as names and recent events.
- Getting lost in places you know well or being confused about where you are.
- Trouble doing tasks, such as balancing a checkbook, paying bills, or planning events.

- Problems with language, such as trouble finding the right word or understanding what someone else is saying.
- Changes in your personality and in the way you act, such as feeling sad, angry, or confused.

Most adults have trouble remembering things from time to time. This usually does not point to a serious memory problem. But if you have any of these symptoms and feel they are getting worse, talk with your healthcare provider. Let them know if these symptoms are getting in the way of your daily life.



For caregivers: If you're taking care of a loved one and are worried about their memory, talk with their healthcare provider. Tell them if your loved one has any of these symptoms and if they are getting worse.

Diagnosing Dementia

There's no single test that can diagnose (find the cause of) dementia. To find out if you have dementia, your healthcare provider will:

- Review your health history.
- Give you a physical exam.
- Order blood tests.
- Check your memory, problem-solving, counting, and language skills.

Your healthcare provider may also order brain scans to gather more information. They may have you get a computed tomography (CT) scan or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).



For caregivers: If you're taking care of a loved one and are worried they may have dementia, talk with their healthcare provider. They can help your loved one get a dementia diagnosis.

Treatment for Dementia

At this time, there is no cure for dementia. There are some medications that may treat symptoms for a period of time. Your healthcare provider will talk with you about these and other treatment options.

You may also feel better by doing these things:

- Getting enough sleep.
- Having routines, such as eating meals and going to bed at the same time each day.
- Keeping up with social events.
- Decorating your home with familiar items, such as personal photos.



For caregivers: If you're taking care of a loved one who may need treatment for dementia, talk with their healthcare provider. They can tell you about treatment options for your loved one.

How to Help Your Loved One

When dementia gets worse, your loved one may need help at home. There are many ways you can support your loved one, such as:

- Keeping them in a daily routine.
- Letting them rest in between activities.
- Setting reminders throughout the day to remind them of the date and time of day.
- Making sure there's enough for them to eat and drink.
- Having them go to the bathroom on a regular basis.
- Making sure their home is a calm and safe setting by:
    - Having enough lighting in each room.
    - Getting rid of any clutter.
    - Reducing distractions, such as loud music.
    - Putting grab bars in bathtubs and showers.
    - Using non-skid strips or mats in showers to keep them from slipping or falling.

Talk with your loved one's healthcare provider if there are changes in the way they are acting. For example, you may notice that they are getting more confused about things or are slipping or falling more.

Ask your loved one's healthcare provider, case manager, or social worker for help if they:

- Become violent.
- Show changes in their personality or in the way they act.
- Are not safe when they are home alone.
- Need help taking care of themselves.

Some people may benefit from living in a long-term care facility, such as a nursing home or assisted living facility. Ask your loved one's care team for more information.

Resources

There are many resources that can help you learn more about dementia. Contact these groups to learn about their services and to get reading materials.

Alzheimer's Association
www.alz.org
24-hour helpline: 800-272-3900

Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center
www.nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers
800-438-4380
adear@nia.nih.gov

Eldercare Locator
eldercare.acl.gov/Public/Index.aspx
800-677-1116
eldercarelocator@USAging.org

HealthinAging.org
www.healthinaging.org
212-308-1414
info@healthinaging.org

National Institute on Aging
www.nia.nih.gov
800-222-2225
niaic@nia.nih.gov

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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