
Dementia

Dementia is a general term for a decline in mental ability severe enough to interfere with daily life. Dementia is not a single disease; it's the umbrella term for an individual's changes in memory, thinking or reasoning. There are many possible causes of dementia, including Alzheimer's disease. Disorders grouped under the general term "dementia" are caused by abnormal brain changes. These changes trigger a decline in thinking skills, also known as cognitive abilities, severe enough to impair daily life and independent function. They also affect behavior, feelings and relationships.

Brain changes that cause dementia may be temporary, but they are most often permanent and worsen, leading to increasing disability and a shortened life span. Survival can vary widely, depending on such factors as the cause of the dementia, age at diagnosis and coexisting health conditions.

Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia, accounting for 60% to 80% of cases. Vascular dementia, which occurs because of microscopic bleeding and blood vessel blockage in the brain, is the second most common cause of dementia.

Other types and causes of dementia are:

- Mixed dementia
- Frontotemporal dementia
- Dementia with Lewy bodies (DLB)
- Parkinson's disease (PD)
- Normal pressure hydrocephalus
- Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease

Individuals with Down syndrome, Huntington's disease and Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome are at risk for developing dementia symptoms.

With mixed dementia, abnormalities characteristic of more than one type of dementia occur simultaneously in the brain. Physicians may also call this condition "dementia-multifactorial." In the most common form of mixed dementia, the abnormal protein deposits associated with Alzheimer's disease coexist with blood vessel problems linked to vascular dementia. Alzheimer's brain changes also often coexist with Lewy bodies, the abnormal protein deposits characteristic of dementia with Lewy bodies

and Parkinson's disease dementia. In some cases, a person may have brain changes linked to Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia and dementia with Lewy bodies.

Symptoms of dementia can vary greatly. Examples include problems with short-term memory, keeping track of a purse or wallet, paying bills, planning and preparing meals, remembering appointments and getting lost in familiar locations. Mixed dementia symptoms may vary, depending on the types of brain changes involved and the brain regions affected. In many cases, symptoms may be similar to — or even indistinguishable from — those of Alzheimer's or another specific type of dementia. In other cases, a person's symptoms may suggest that more than one type of dementia is present.

Some individuals have a condition that is not dementia but has symptoms mimicking those of dementia. Common causes of dementia-like symptoms are depression, delirium, side effects from medications, thyroid problems, certain vitamin deficiencies and excessive use of alcohol. Unlike dementia, these conditions may often be reversed with treatment.

Research suggests that adopting multiple healthy lifestyle choices, including a healthy diet, not smoking, regular exercise and cognitive stimulation, may decrease the risk of cognitive decline and dementia.

A physician can help identify the specific cause of dementia, provide appropriate care and, in some cases, offer guidance on available treatment options.

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