



What is dementia?

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Being Dementia Aware

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Introduction

There is a lot of discussion about dementia these days. You might have noticed the topic comes up often on the news and in the media. The number of people living with dementia is increasing and most people will know someone who has had dementia. This guide is for anyone who is interested in finding out about dementia and the signs and symptoms of the condition.

What is Dementia?

Dementia is a set of symptoms caused by damage to the brain from certain diseases or conditions. Dementia is usually progressive which means once a person has it, it gets worse overtime. Currently there is no cure for dementia. Symptoms can include problems with memory, thinking, mental agility, language and understanding. Dementia is common – around 93,000 people in Scotland are living with the condition.

Types of Dementia

There are around 100 conditions which cause dementia. Some types are more common than others.

- **Alzheimer's disease** causes damage to brain cells. It is the most common cause of dementia, accounting for around two thirds of cases.
- **Vascular dementia** is the second most common type of dementia. It is caused by a reduced bloody supply to the brain due to conditions such as, high blood pressure, stroke or irregular heart rhythms.
- **Dementia with Lewy Bodies** accounts for around 10 percent of cases. Lewy bodies are tiny deposits of protein that can build up in the cells of the brain and cause damage.

- **Frontotemporal dementia** is a less common type of dementia. It is caused when abnormal proteins in the brain damage brain cells.
- **Mixed dementia** is when someone has more than one type of dementia. It is common to have both Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia together.

Rarer types of dementia account for around 5% of cases.

- **Posterior Cortical Atrophy** is a form of Alzheimer's disease which causes damage to the brain cells at the back of the brain (posterior). This part of the brain is vital for judging space and distance, and for making sense of what we see.
- **HIV associated dementia** affects around 50 percent of people with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). HIV can affect brain function and motor skills.
- **Parkinson's with dementia** is a condition that some people experience in the later stages of Parkinson's disease. It is thought to be caused by a build up of Lewy bodies in the cells of the brain.
- **Korsakoff's syndrome** is a type of a dementia that does not get worse over time. It is usually caused by excessive alcohol consumption.

Risk factors

Many people think if their parents or family members had dementia then they will get it too. It is true that certain genes can increase the risk slightly. Some forms of Alzheimer's disease are also genetic and passed through family, however these are very rare. The biggest risk factor for dementia is older age, particularly for those over the age of 65.

Scotland's older population is growing. In 2013, less than one in five of the population was 65 or over. This is predicted to rise to over one in four by 2037. As the risk of dementia increases with age, it is likely that the proportion of the Scottish population living with, or caring for a person with dementia, will rise rapidly.

Other risk factors include gender. It is estimated that more than two thirds of people living with dementia are female. There is also a correlation between severe or repeated head injury and dementia. This may be due to inflammation of the brain that can occur following a head injury.

Reducing your Risk

You might have noticed a lot of reports in the media claiming a cure for dementia is just around the corner. It is true that a range of different treatments are being investigated at the moment, however it is likely to be several years or even decades before a cure is found.

The good news is there are many things you can do to reduce your risk of developing dementia. What is good for your heart is also good for your head, so eating a balanced diet and doing regular physical activity is very important. Stopping smoking and reducing alcohol consumption can help as well.

For more information see Age Scotland's publication *Reducing your Risk of Dementia*.

Signs and Symptoms

Many people associate dementia with memory loss, however just because someone is struggling with their memory, it doesn't necessarily mean they have dementia. Memory problems can occur for a number of reasons including stress, lack of sleep, depression, certain medications and an infection. A slight decline in memory is normal as people age but sometimes memory loss can be an early sign of dementia.

Dementia affects everyone differently and no two people will have symptoms that develop in exactly the same way. However, there are some symptoms that are commonly experienced, particularly in the early stages of the condition. These include:

- Difficulties with short-term memory – losing things, forgetting peoples' names or the names of everyday objects.
- Language difficulties and struggling to follow conversations
- Problems with spatial awareness – difficulty parking, crossing roads, judging distances or the size and shape of objects.
- Feeling confused or disorientated
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulties with planning and organising – not turning up to routine appointments or struggling to do everyday tasks.
- Changes in mood and behaviour
- Sleep disturbances
- Changes to appetite
- Problems with vision – failing to spot things right under one's nose, or inability to tell coins and notes apart when handling money.

The different types of dementia have different symptoms and can progress in different ways. For example, Alzheimer's disease tends to progress gradually, whilst people living with vascular dementia can have long periods where symptoms are stable followed by periods where symptoms rapidly worsen.

What to do if I am worried?

If you are worried that your memory is getting worse or you are concerned about other non-physical symptoms you are experiencing, it is important to speak to your GP. For more information see Age Scotland's publication *Could it be dementia?*

Useful contacts

Age Scotland

Age Scotland is the largest charity in Scotland dedicated to enabling everyone to make the most of later life. We provide information for people through our publications and online. The Age Scotland Helpline provides information, friendship and advice to older people, their relatives and carers.

Age Scotland Helpline: **0800 12 44 222**

www.agescotland.org.uk

Alzheimer Scotland

Alzheimer Scotland is the leading dementia organisation in Scotland. It campaigns for the rights of people with dementia and their families and provide an extensive range of innovative and personalised support services.

Freephone 24 Hour Dementia Helpline: **0808 808 3000**

www.alzscot.org



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