

What is Dementia?

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

Dementia is not a specific disease. It is a descriptive term for a collection of symptoms that can be caused by a number of disorders that affect the brain. People with dementia have significantly impaired intellectual functioning that interferes with normal activities and relationships. They also lose their ability to solve problems and maintain emotional control, and they may experience personality changes and behavioral problems, such as agitation, delusions, and hallucinations. While memory loss is a common symptom of dementia, memory loss by itself does not mean that a person has dementia. Doctors diagnose dementia only if two or more brain functions - such as memory and language skills -- are significantly impaired without loss of consciousness. Some of the diseases that can cause symptoms of dementia are Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia, Lewy body dementia, frontotemporal dementia, Huntington's disease, and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. Doctors have identified other conditions that can cause dementia or dementia-like symptoms including reactions to medications, metabolic problems and endocrine abnormalities, nutritional deficiencies, infections, poisoning, brain tumors, anoxia or hypoxia (conditions in which the brain's oxygen supply is either reduced or cut off entirely), and heart and lung problems. Although it is common in very elderly individuals, dementia is not a normal part of the aging process.

Is there any treatment?

Drugs to specifically treat Alzheimer's disease and some other progressive dementias are now available. Although these drugs do not halt the disease or reverse existing brain damage, they can improve symptoms and slow the progression of the disease. This may improve an individual's quality of life, ease the burden on caregivers, or delay admission to a nursing home. Many researchers are also examining whether these drugs may be useful for treating other types of dementia. Many people with dementia, particularly those in the early stages, may benefit from practicing tasks designed to improve performance in specific aspects of cognitive functioning. For example, people can sometimes be taught to use memory aids, such as mnemonics, computerized recall devices, or note taking.

What is the prognosis?

There are many disorders that can cause dementia. Some, such as Alzheimer's disease or Huntington's disease, lead to a progressive loss of mental functions. But other types of dementia can be halted or reversed with appropriate treatment. People with moderate or advanced dementia typically need round-the-clock care and supervision to prevent them from harming themselves or others. They also may need assistance with daily activities such as eating, bathing, and dressing.