

# What is DEMENTIA?



Dementia is a word that conjures up fear and misunderstanding for most people. Because so much of the brain's function has historically been, and is still to some extent, unknown, dementia has been shrouded in mystery and fear. More and more is being discovered about dementia thanks to research, medical technology, and person-centered care. A greater understanding of the causes of memory loss and impaired thinking is helping to dispel harmful myths and promote better care and support for people living with any kind of dementia.



## WHAT IS DEMENTIA AND WHAT DO WE REALLY KNOW ABOUT IT?

Dementia is not a specific disease; it is a term that describes a set of symptoms related to a person's declining cognitive ability. Specific diseases, like Alzheimer's disease, cause dementia. Saying someone has dementia describes the symptoms they are experiencing, such as memory loss, impaired judgement, or personality changes. It does not describe the disease that is causing those changes. So, while labeling someone as "having dementia" helps people understand that their cognitive abilities are changing; it does not identify the underlying problem.



## SYMPTOMS OF DEMENTIA

Most people associate dementia with memory loss, but dementia can include other kinds of symptoms as well. Common symptoms include:

- Memory loss
- Impaired reasoning or problem solving
- Difficulty with complex tasks, planning, and organizing
- Confusion
- Loss of language and communication skills or trouble finding words
- Disorientation with time and space
- Personality or mood changes

## TYPES OF DEMENTIA

The causes, or types, of dementia are many and varied. The dementias we usually think of are neurodegenerative disorders, which cause progressive and permanent loss of neurons and brain functioning. These types of dementia are numerous. Some of the more common types include:

- Alzheimer's disease
- Frontotemporal dementia
- Lewy body dementia
- Vascular dementia
- Mixed dementia (combination of two or more disorders)
- Parkinson's disease dementia

Since dementia refers to the set of symptoms, not the cause, some types of dementia are treatable or reversible. In these cases, if the cause of the dementia is treated, the dementia itself would be reversed as well.

Some treatable causes of dementia include:

- Depression
- Head injury
- Thyroid, kidney, or liver problems

- Medication side effects or interactions
- Certain vitamin deficiencies
- Infections such as urinary tract infection
- Sleep disorders

## AGING AND DEMENTIA

Most of the progressive dementia-related disorders primarily impact older adults, so the risk of developing dementia increases as a person ages. However, not all older people get dementia and significant memory loss is not a normal part of aging. The aging brain does tend to slow down a little bit but most people do not experience dementia.

Because the causes of dementia are so diverse, and not all of them are progressive, it's important for someone experiencing symptoms of dementia to seek out the cause. Research has given us the ability to give more precise diagnoses than was possible in the past. With brain imaging technology and more knowledge of the disease processes for Alzheimer's and other diseases, it is possible to determine the cause of the dementia in the brain.

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