Dementia: understanding the causes and symptoms

When older adults begin forgetting things, they—and their families—often fear it's the onset of dementia. However, it's a myth that we lose significant intellectual function as we age. As people reach their 60s and 70s, learning new skills and remembering facts may take a little more time. However, most people never develop dementia, a term used to describe a group of diseases characterized by a progressive decline of mental functions.



Although the rate of dementia increases with age, many cases of memory loss are not permanent and can be attributed to depression, physical conditions such as vitamin deficiencies or infections, and just plain forgetfulness.

If you are concerned about your own or a loved one's memory problems, contact a doctor to ensure all possible causes are examined. In the meantime, here is some further information:

Common symptoms of dementia may include:

- Confusion—not where did I park the car, but how did I get here?
- Forgetting names of familiar people and places
- Problems walking and moving around
- Doing or saying things repeatedly
- Difficulty making the simplest decisions and/or finishing everyday tasks like housework or grocery shopping.
- Restlessness and agitation
- Sitting doing nothing for extended periods
- Being stubborn or uncooperative
- Talking to yourself or talking in a senseless manner

Other symptoms can include:

- Disturbed sleep patterns
- Seeing things that aren't there
- Being fearful or suspicious of people
- Exhibiting anti-social behaviour
- Threatening to hurt yourself

Causes of dementia

There are many diseases and conditions that can cause dementia. If you or a loved one are frustrated by more simple forgetfulness, do some research or talk to your doctor or other health care professional about what may be causing this. Sometimes something as simple as a change in diet or drinking more water can get your mind back in the flow of information. To determine if you or a loved one is suffering from any of the more serious causes of dementia—and the best course of treatment—talk to your doctor.

Causes of true dementia may include:

- Alzheimer's disease
- Vascular dementia
- Gerstamann-Straussler syndrome
- AIDS
- Parkinson's disease
- Alcoholis

If a loved one has dementia

Though living with dementia can be difficult, watching or caring for another with dementia has its own difficulties. If you're regularly caring for a loved one with dementia, be sure to make sure you, too, are getting the care you need. Here are a few things you may consider doing to help a loved one who may be suffering from dementia:

- Accompany your older relative to the doctor for a check-up
- If dementia is diagnosed, ask for referrals to find out whether your loved one is eligible for any in-home assistance
- If dementia is advanced, you may need to consider alternative living arrangements for your relative
- If memory loss is due to other causes or to just plain forgetfulness, problem solve with your relative on coping strategies
- Consider whether it would be helpful for your relative to have a list of names by the phone of people seen regularly, along with large print phone numbers
- A large calendar may be helpful, posted with regular events such as grocery shopping days—not just special days
- Keep a duplicate calendar in your own home, so that you can help your relative focus on upcoming needs or appointments
- Continue to do activities you enjoy together. Many people with dementia enjoy singing or familiar craft projects
- Keep your sense of humour!

Though we all forget things from time to time, people with dementia suffer from a marked, progressive decline of mental functions. Unfortunately, there is no known cure for most forms of dementia. However, by knowing the signs of the dementia, and working closely with your doctor, people with many forms of the condition can enjoy a fair quality of life for years to come.