



Wake Forest University School of Medicine
**Women's Health Center of Excellence for Research,
Leadership, Education**

Fact Sheet

Dementia

The term "dementia" describes a group of symptoms that are caused by changes in brain function. Dementia symptoms may include asking the same questions repeatedly; becoming lost in familiar places; being unable to follow directions; getting disoriented about time, people, and places; and neglecting personal safety, hygiene, and nutrition. People with dementia lose their abilities at different rates.

The two most common forms of dementia are Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia.

Types of dementia

Alzheimer's disease (AD) involves the parts of the brain that control thought, memory, and language. Scientists learn more every day, but right now the causes of AD are still unknown, and there is no cure. Changes in the brain tissue cause abnormal clumps (called amyloid plaques) and tangled bundles of fibers (called neurofibrillary tangles). There is a loss of nerve cells in areas of the brain that are important to memory and other mental abilities. There also are lower levels of chemicals in the brain that carry complex messages back and forth between nerve cells. AD may disrupt normal thinking and memory by blocking these messages between nerve cells.

Vascular Dementia. This type of dementia results either from extensive narrowing and blockage of the arteries that supply blood to the brain or from strokes, caused by an interruption of blood flow to the brain. Symptoms usually start suddenly, but sometimes the disease develops slowly, making it difficult to differentiate from AD. It's common for vascular dementia to cause problems with thinking, language, walking, bladder control and vision. Preventing more strokes by treating other diseases, such as high blood pressure, may stop the development of vascular dementia.

Who is most likely to suffer from dementia?

Dementia can occur at any age, but is more common after age 60. The elderly, those with a family history of dementia, and those with stroke risk factors are at higher risk.

What is the treatment for dementia?

There is no cure for AD or vascular dementia, but many of the symptoms can be treated or managed so the patient can remain comfortable and live independently for as long as possible. There are medicines called cholinesterase inhibitors that may be used to treat the symptoms of AD.

This information is general. If your doctor tells you something different, follow his or her instructions.

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Revised June 2004