

# Alzheimer's Disease

## and other forms of dementia

**Dementia is a general term meaning an irreversible decline in mental function involving a loss of memory and thinking ability. It is different to simple forgetfulness and is not a normal consequence of ageing. Support services are available for people with dementia and their families and carers.**

There are a number of different forms of dementia with different causes.

Alzheimer's disease, which involves brain tissue degeneration, is the most common form of dementia. It most commonly develops after the age of 65 years, but can begin earlier.

Vascular dementia, caused by poor blood flow to the brain (e.g., after a stroke), is the second most common form of dementia.

### Signs and symptoms

Dementia affects different people in different ways. Although a person's abilities may change from day to day, dementia gets worse over time.

Signs and symptoms include:

- Problems with memory and thinking
- Changes in personality, mood and behaviour
- Language and communication problems
- Difficulties with everyday tasks.

A person with **early** or **mild dementia** may:

- Lose interest in hobbies and activities
- Forget details of recent events
- Show poor judgment and make poor decisions
- Blame others for 'stealing' lost items
- Repeat themselves, make mistakes in speech or lose the thread of their conversation
- Be unwilling to try new things or less able to adapt to change

- Have difficulty in handling money, following directions and carrying out everyday tasks
- Be more irritable or upset if they fail at something.

These symptoms are often hard to notice or may be put down to old age or stress.

A person with **moderate dementia** needs increasing help to manage day-to-day living.

At this stage, the person may:

- Be more forgetful of recent events
- Be confused regarding time and place
- Forget names of family and friends, or confuse one person for another
- Begin to wander or become lost if away from familiar surroundings
- Be unable to carry out basic tasks (e.g., bathing, dressing, eating) without assistance
- Behave inappropriately or in a way that may embarrass others
- See or hear things that are not there
- Become very repetitive
- Easily become restless, agitated, angry or distressed.

A person with **advanced** or **severe dementia** is severely disabled and needs total care.

## Management

Education and support services are available for people with dementia, their families and carers through Alzheimer's

Australia and other services. Some people with Alzheimer's disease can be helped by medicines which improve or slow down the decline of their mental function. Medicines can also help relieve other symptoms that accompany dementia (e.g., anxiety, depression). Ask a doctor for advice.

## What to do if concerned

Gently discuss your concerns with the person and offer to accompany them to their doctor. If you are concerned about your spouse and you share the same doctor, talk with your doctor.

## Communicating

When communicating with a person with dementia:

- Always be respectful
- Keep calm and speak clearly, naturally and gently
- Maintain eye contact and keep your expression friendly
- Avoid background noise
- Use short, simple sentences, focussing on one idea at a time
- Allow plenty of time for the person to respond
- If the person is having problems communicating, gently help them find a way to express themselves.

## Ways to help

Family and friends play an important part in the lives of people affected by dementia. They provide valuable links

to past experiences and enable a person with dementia to feel loved and valued.

Family and friends can support people with dementia and their carers by:

- Learning about dementia
- Asking how they can help (some people are reluctant to ask for help, but may readily accept an offer of help)
- Offering to spend time with the person with dementia to give the carer a break
- Providing practical help, such as bringing a meal or helping with shopping or gardening
- Listening attentively (without judging) and supporting difficult decisions.

## Self care

### For people with early dementia

- Get a thorough assessment from your local doctor and referral to specialists if necessary.
- Seek support from family and friends.
- Contact Alzheimer's Australia for information and support.
- Find out about the range of community services available in your area by contacting the Commonwealth Carelink Centre.
- If you are having difficulty managing your medicines, ask your pharmacist about dose administration aids (e.g., weekly blister packs).

### For carers

The physical and emotional demands of caring for a person with dementia can be exhausting.

- Learn as much as you can about dementia and the help available (e.g., Alzheimer's Australia has more than 70 help sheets on different aspects of dementia).
- Make time for your own needs.
- Look after your own health.
- Seek support from family and friends.
- Join a support group – contact Alzheimer's Australia for advice.
- Check with Centrelink about financial support.

## For more information

### **MedicAlert**

Phone: 1800 88 22 22  
www.medicalert.org.au

### **Alzheimer's Australia**

Phone the National Dementia Helpline on  
1800 100 500  
Website: www.alzheimers.org.au

### **The Aged Care Information Line**

Phone: 1800 500 853  
Website: www.agedcareaustralia.gov.au

### **Carer Advisory Service**

Phone: 1800 242 636  
Website: www.carersaustralia.com.au

### **Commonwealth Carelink Centres**

Phone: 1800 052 222  
Website:  
www.commcarelink.health.gov.au

### **Commonwealth Carer Respite Centres**

Phone: 1800 059 059

### **Centrelink**

Phone: 13 27 17  
Website: www.centrelink.gov.au

### **Healthdirect Australia**

Phone: 1800 022 222  
Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

### **Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**

Your pharmacist can advise on  
CMI leaflets.

### **National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information**

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)  
Website: www.nps.org.au

### **The Poisons Information Centre**

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from  
anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.  
Ask a pharmacist for advice when  
choosing a medicine.*

## Related fact cards

- » *Anxiety*
- » *Bladder and Urine Control*
- » *Carer Support (website only –  
ask your pharmacist)*
- » *Constipation*
- » *Depression*
- » *Preventing Falls*
- » *Relaxation Techniques*
- » *Sleeping Problems*
- » *Urinary Tract Infections*

Your Self Care Pharmacy: