

UNDERSTANDING DEMENTIA

To understand dementia behaviors, you need to better understand the disorder itself. Unlike other illnesses, dementia isn't a specific disease; rather, the term dementia is an umbrella term used to describe multiple symptoms associated with memory decline and additional losses of other critical abilities that affect a person's everyday life and make common activities difficult or impossible to perform.

Causes

Dementia is caused by damage to brain cells. This damage interferes with the ability of brain cells to communicate with each other. When brain cells cannot communicate normally, thinking, behavior and feelings can be affected.

The brain has many distinct regions, each of which is responsible for different functions (for example, memory, judgment, and movement). When cells in a particular region are damaged, that region cannot carry out its functions normally.

Symptoms

Different types of dementia can affect people differently, and everyone will experience symptoms in their own way.

However, there are some common early symptoms that may appear some time before a diagnosis of dementia. These include:

- Memory loss
- Difficulty concentrating
- Finding it hard to carry out familiar daily tasks, such as getting confused over the correct change when shopping
- Struggling to follow a conversation or find the right word
- Being confused about time and place
- Mood changes
- Memory problems, such as regularly forgetting recent events, names, and faces
- Asking questions repetitively
- Increasing difficulties with tasks and activities that require organization and planning
- Becoming confused in unfamiliar environments
- Difficulty finding the right words
- Difficulty with numbers and/or handling money
- Becoming more withdrawn or anxious

Diagnosis of dementia

There is no one test to determine if someone has dementia. Doctors diagnose Alzheimer's and other types of dementia based on a careful medical history, a physical examination, laboratory tests, and the characteristic changes in thinking, day-to-day function and behavior associated with each type. Doctors can determine that a person has dementia with a high level of certainty. But it's harder to determine the exact type of dementia because the symptoms and brain changes of different dementias can overlap. In some cases, a doctor may diagnose "dementia" and not specify a type. If this occurs, it may be necessary to see a specialist such as a neurologist, psychiatrist, psychologist, or geriatrician.

Treatment and Care

Though there is no cure for dementia, there are certain measures that can be taken to control the symptoms and keep life as normal as possible. The main goal in treatment is to isolate and treat the underlying cause of dementia. Some treatment methods include:

- Medications for the underlying condition, as well as medications to help with dementia symptoms.
- Mental and physical exercise
- Smoking cessation
- Maintaining a healthy diet

Regardless of what treatment method you and your physician choose, it is essential that you follow your care plan exactly. The more precise you are with your treatment, the better your results can be.

It is crucial that individuals with dementia are cared for and supervised. If you notice that you, or somebody around you are experiencing any symptoms of dementia, contact your healthcare provider to be examined.

References:

Alzheimer's Association (2014). What is Dementia? <http://www.alz.org/what-is-dementia.asp>

Medical Guardian: <https://www.medicalguardian.com/medical-alert-blog/caregiver-corner/caregivers-guide-to-understanding-dementia->

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NHS: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/dementia/symptoms/>