

Dementia is a mental health condition with some physical symptoms and social implications. There are many kinds of dementia but the most common is Alzheimer's disease. Other kinds of dementia include Vascular, Lewy Body, Frontotemporal, alcohol-related dementias and many others. It is possible to have more than one type of dementia at the same time and all of these diseases affect your brain's ability to function as it used to.

Around 84,000 people in Scotland have dementia. It is most common in older people but can affect people in their 40s, 50s or even younger.

What are the symptoms of dementia?

Each person is different. The symptoms depend on which areas of the brain are affected. One of the most common symptoms is memory loss, forgetting the names of family members as well as friends and neighbours, or the person may get confused with the time of day or the ability to think, reason, calculate and handle money can be impaired. There may be personality and behavioural changes too. Often, people will have problems with their short term memory, forgetting things that happened just a minute or two previously.

There are other less well known symptoms such as fatigue, visual impairment, difficulty with balance and a more acute sensitivity to noise.

What causes dementia?

We do not know exactly what causes dementia. Medical researchers all over the world are working to find causes and develop treatments.

Alzheimer's disease

Alzheimer's disease damages individual brain cells one by one, so that the brain can't work as well as it used to. A protein called amyloid builds up in deposits, called plaques, and tiny filaments in the brain cell form tangles.

With Alzheimer's disease there is usually a slow, steady progression of the illness.

Some rare kinds of Alzheimer's disease affecting people under 65 can be inherited. Faulty genes may cause the build-up of the amyloid protein. Recent research seems to show that there may also be a genetic factor in other cases of Alzheimer's disease. However, this does not mean that someone whose parent had Alzheimer's will automatically develop the disease.

Vascular dementia

A problem with the blood supply to the brain can cause some people to have tiny strokes which damage small areas in the brain and can cause dementia. With vascular dementia, there is a more "stepped" progression of the illness.

Frontotemporal dementia

It is not fully known how this type of dementia happens. There seems to be an abnormal growth of some types of proteins in the brain cells affecting those parts responsible for decision making, emotion, language and control of behaviour. In around 30–50% of cases there may be a family history of this illness.

What should I do if I'm worried?

It is very important not to jump to conclusions. Confusion or forgetfulness does not mean someone has dementia, nor is dementia an inevitable part of growing older. Many other conditions, like depression or the side effects of medicines, can cause similar symptoms. Dementia can only be diagnosed by ruling out other causes. If you are worried see your GP who may ask you some questions to test your memory and do some blood tests, and may refer you to a specialist. Your GP might also ask to speak to another family member. The earlier a person gets a diagnosis of dementia, the sooner he or she can start to come to terms with it, access the support and services they are entitled to and make plans for the future and for living well with dementia.

Treatment and research

A diagnosis of dementia is a serious diagnosis and although there is no cure for dementia at present, much research into causes and treatments is going on. There are drugs which may help some people with the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, and also Lewy Body dementia. In addition, due to early diagnosis, therapeutic interventions and some medications, many people continue to live within their families and communities for many years.

Further information

If you or someone you know has dementia, it may help to talk to someone about how you feel and what you can do. You can call the 24 hour Freephone Dementia Helpline on **0808 808 3000** at any time for further information or advice on anything that is worrying you about dementia. You can also find lots of information on the Alzheimer Scotland website www.alzscot.org and specific information for carers at www.carers.org

This leaflet has been prepared to provide information for people with dementia, and for their carers.