

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT DEMENTIA

In the Clinic
Annals of Internal Medicine

What Is Dementia?

Dementia is a decline in mental function that interferes with your daily life. There are different types of dementia, with Alzheimer disease and vascular dementia among the most common. Although dementia can begin at any age after childhood, it most commonly develops later in life. Symptoms usually start slowly and worsen over time.



What Are the Symptoms?

You may first notice symptoms at the time of a life change, such as a spouse's death, a hospitalization, or a vacation in an unfamiliar place. Symptoms include:

- Increased forgetfulness that may cause you to lose objects
- Not remembering previous conversations
- Trouble finding the right words
- Difficulty with familiar activities, like preparing a meal or making a phone call
- Feeling disoriented while out walking or driving
- Personality changes, such as becoming very confused, suspicious, or fearful

Can It Be Prevented?

Evidence shows that certain lifestyle changes may prevent a decline in mental function later in life. These include:

- Staying physically active
- Eating a healthy diet
- Staying social
- Doing activities that keep your mind busy, like puzzles
- Quitting smoking
- Controlling blood pressure, blood sugar, and cholesterol

How Is It Diagnosed?

There is no specific test for dementia. If your health care provider suspects you have dementia, they will ask questions about your symptoms and take a detailed medical history. They will also want to speak with a family member or friend who knows you well. Your provider will administer:

- A physical examination that also addresses mental status, speech, and mood
- Short screening tests that assess memory and language

You could also have laboratory tests or brain imaging to rule out other medical conditions that cause similar symptoms.

How Is It Treated?

Because dementia is progressive, treatment focuses on controlling your symptoms and avoiding harm. Regular medical checkups will maximize your function and well-being. These will include hearing and vision checks; reviewing medications that might make your symptoms worse; and ensuring that your vaccines are up-to-date and chronic diseases, like diabetes, are controlled. You will also be monitored for anxiety, depression, agitation, sleep disturbances, and hallucinations.

You and your caregivers should create a calm, predictable environment. Get enough rest, eat well, brush your teeth, and stay clean. Discuss your values and wishes with your caregivers early so they can make the best health care decisions for you if you become unable to do so. Having a care plan in place to address limitations caused by dementia is also important. Your provider may suggest a home safety assessment or a driving assessment. These will evaluate whether you are still able to cook, drive, keep track of medications, and do other activities independently. Medicines are available to treat dementia symptoms. However, they are only mildly effective and have side effects. Talk with your provider about what is best for you.

Questions for My Doctor

- How do I know whether my memory loss is dementia?
- How can I manage my symptoms?
- Will medicine help me? Does it have side effects?
- How can I document my wishes to ensure they are followed?
- Will I need to go to an assisted living facility or a nursing home?
- Are there things I should stop doing now?
- Do I need to see a specialist?
- Are there support groups for me or my caregivers?

For More Information



Alzheimer's Association

www.alz.org/alzheimers-dementia/what-is-dementia

National Institute on Aging

www.nia.nih.gov/health/what-dementia-symptoms-types-and-diagnosis

Advance Care Planning

www.nia.nih.gov/health/advance-care-planning-healthcare-directives
<https://polst.org>