

# Seniors and Memory Loss (Dementia): Problems, Diagnostics, and Prevention.

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The literal meaning of the word Dementia is “mind away” or “deprived of mind”. Dementia (Memory Lost) is a relatively common disorder among seniors. Dementia affects over 15 percent of those over age 65. This number is growing and reaches 50% for the age group of 85+. Dementia-related disorders are a group of brain diseases that involve the loss of intellectual functions (such as thinking, memory, and reasoning) of sufficient severity to interfere with daily functioning.

Decline in memory generally accompanies a number of other changes that interrupt an individual’s ability to carry out normal daily activities. Most significant are the changes in the frontal section of the brain that control executive functions, such as planning, problem solving, motivation, and impulse control. Other common changes include language and emotional responses. In addition, a decline in cognitive processes affects the understanding of spatial relationships, number calculation, abstract thinking, and personality. The rate of progression differs according to the type of dementia and varies from person to person.

Dementias are often categorized according to the suspected causes of the disease. Common causes are typically described as:

- *Degenerative*, as with Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s and Pick’s diseases
- *Vascular*, as with multi-infarct dementia (small strokes that decrease blood flow to the brain)
- *Infectious*, as with AIDS, “mad cow” disease, etc.
- *Toxic*, as with alcohol, drugs, and heavy-metal exposure.
- *Metabolic*, as with thyroid disease and vitamin B12 deficiency
- *Depression-related*
- *Other*, including miscellaneous conditions such as head injury or brain tumor.

Alzheimer’s disease accounts for 60 to 70 percent of all cases of dementia, with another 15 to 30 percent linked to the other progressive disorders.

Although many similarities exist between the many types of dementia, there are also several key differences. Most important, with proper diagnosis and treatment, some dementia can be reversed. In fact, it is estimated that up to 5 percent of people with dementia-related illnesses may have conditions that are completely reversible. Among the dementias that may be partially or totally reversed are those caused by drug, alcohol, and poison toxicity; depression, vitamin B12 deficiency, etc.

To help family members and health care professionals recognize warning signs of dementia, the Alzheimer’s Association has developed a checklist of common symptoms:

- *Memory Loss:* It's normal to occasionally forget assignments, colleagues' names, or business associates' telephone numbers and remember them later. Those with a dementia such as Alzheimer's disease may forget things more often, and *not* remember them later.
- *Difficulty performing familiar tasks:* Busy people can be so distracted from time to time that they may leave the carrots on the stove and remember to serve them only at the end of the meal. People with Alzheimer's disease could prepare a meal and not only forget to serve it, but also forget they made it.
- *Problems with language:* Everyone has trouble finding the right word sometimes, but people with Alzheimer's disease may forget simple words or substitute inappropriate words, making their sentences incomprehensible.
- *Disorientation to time and place:* It's normal to forget the day of the week or your destination for a moment. But people with Alzheimer's disease can become lost on their own streets, not knowing where they are, how they got there or how to get back home.
- *Poor or decreased judgment:* People can become so immersed in an activity that they temporarily forget the child they're watching. People with Alzheimer's disease could forget entirely the children under their care. They may also dress inappropriately, wearing several shirts or blouses.
- *Problems with abstract thinking:* Balancing a checkbook may be disconcerting when the task is more complicated than usual. Someone with Alzheimer's disease could forget completely what the numbers are and what needs to be done with them.
- *Misplacing things:* Anyone can temporarily misplace a wallet or keys. A person with Alzheimer's disease may put things in inappropriate places – an iron in the freezer or a wristwatch in the sugar bowl.
- *Changes in mood or behavior:* Everyone becomes sad or moody from time to time. People with Alzheimer's disease can exhibit rapid mood swings – from calm to tears to anger – for no apparent reason.
- *Changes in personality:* people's personalities ordinarily change somewhat with age. But people with Alzheimer's disease can change drastically, becoming extremely confused, suspicious, or fearful.
- *Loss of initiative:* It's normal to tire of housework, business activities, or social obligations, but most people regain their initiative. People with Alzheimer's disease may become very passive and require cues and prompting to become involved.

If you recognize several of these warning signs in yourself or a loved one, we recommend consulting a physician. Early diagnosis of Alzheimer's or other disorders is an important step in getting appropriate treatment, care and support services. Generally, it is helpful for evaluations of dementia-related illnesses to be completed by geriatric specialists or other physicians experienced in diagnosing dementia, but primary-care physicians are increasingly taking the lead in diagnoses. Sometimes interdisciplinary teams are used to complete assessments. Working with specialists can be very helpful in differentiating types of dementia with similar presentations, as well as identifying situations when more than one dementia-related illness is suspected.

Despite huge scientific effort to find a cure for Alzheimer's disease, there is no cure available today for 50 percent of 85+ seniors that have Alzheimer's. But, at the same time, medical studies show that seniors who continue to work, actively participate in community life, regularly exercises, play intellectual games can avoid the onset of dementia for many years.

Seeking new learning opportunities, practicing existing skills and embracing change can help seniors stay mentally fit no matter what their age.

### **Need more information?**

Ask Dr. Vadim Cherdak, Certified Senior Adviser, for comprehensive in-depth discussion of your needs and to create a plan of care. Dr Cherdak also lectures and leads workshops on different topics related to Senior Care for public organizations and congregations.

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