

Dementia

Dementia is a clinical syndrome or condition in which there is a progressive deterioration of mental faculties, usually over many years. Problems with memory are typically the first sign of dementia. Other symptoms may include difficulties with language, impaired judgment, problems in performing simple tasks such as dressing, and changes in personality and behavior. It is common for people with dementia also to develop clinical depression, agitation, anxiety, or other behavioral symptoms as their disease progresses.

It is important for people to understand that dementia is not an inevitable consequence of aging. Although the risk of developing dementia increases with age, the overwhelming majority of older adults do not have dementia. Most older adults who report problems with memory do not have and may never develop dementia. Minor memory problems may be a normal part of aging and should not be seen as evidence of dementia.

There are a number of brain disorders that can result in dementia. The most common is Alzheimer's disease, accounting for 60-80 percent of dementia cases. Alzheimer's is a progressive and degenerative disease that damages brain cells, especially in the regions responsible for memory and intellectual functions. Currently there is no cure for this progressive disease, although there are drug and non-drug treatments that can help with cognitive and behavioral symptoms.

There are several potentially reversible conditions that can mirror symptoms of dementia.

These include vitamin deficiencies (e.g., B12 vitamin deficiency), hormone abnormalities (e.g., hypothyroidism), and overmedication or unusual drug reactions. Additionally, depression is a common condition in the elderly, and its symptoms can be similar to dementia. Older adults who are depressed often have problems with their memory and social interactions, and can experience moments of confusion. Distinguishing between depression and dementia is crucial as they have different treatments, and with depression, appropriate treatment can actually reverse memory and social symptoms.

The Risks of Ignoring Information on Dementia

The potential harm of relying on inaccurate or incomplete information about dementia and the health care resources appropriate for managing this condition goes beyond the patient. Dementia is often referred to as a "caregiver's disease" because of its impact on family and friends. A person with dementia will need a loved one or loved ones to help with the many new challenges and stresses that, at times, may seem overwhelming and endless. Conflicts may arise within the family while caring for their loved one due to decisions and pressures that come with the disease, especially as it progresses. Also, it is not uncommon for family members to experience depression in reaction to this difficult situation. Family members who confront these challenges without the appropriate knowledge, skills, and resources are in danger of developing their own health problems.

The belief that dementia is inevitable and that there are no effective treatments for any type of dementia can have painful consequences for patients and their families. One potential consequence is that a person exhibiting symptoms commonly seen in dementia may miss the opportunity to have an alternative, and often reversible, condition diagnosed and treated. Additionally, many people believe that nothing can be done to prevent the development of dementia. Although there is no sure way to prevent the development of dementia, there are steps people can take that may reduce their risk and that are unquestionably good for their overall health, especially their heart. These include appropriate attention to the prevention or control of chronic conditions, such as diabetes and high blood pressure, along with regular exercise and proper nutrition. Stated simply, what is good for your heart is good for your brain, too.

What Can Be Done to Reduce the Impact of Dementia?

Although there is no cure for most of those diagnosed with dementia, there are ways to soften its impact on patients and their families. Many families initially wish to keep a loved one with dementia at home, but they soon become overwhelmed by the problems this condition presents. Families can overcome many of these problems if they have a good understanding of dementia and know some effective strategies. Fortunately, materials and programs are available that can provide families with information about how to better manage the home care of individuals with dementia. And there is encouraging research showing that families who learn about dementia and effective management and coping strategies often are able to delay placing their loved one in a nursing home, in some cases up to a year longer, compared to those without similar knowledge and resources.

Many families that are determined to keep their loved one at home become overwhelmed because they fail to use the services of various agencies and organizations in the community that offer assistance to patients with dementia and their families. Respite care and adult day care programs can provide caregivers with much-needed relief from seemingly constant demands of monitoring and caring for a cognitively impaired person. Unfortunately, families often are unaware of the many services and resources that are available.

Support groups are an important part of the care of people with dementia and their families. Many of the emotional conflicts and burdens associated with the constant care of a person with dementia can be eased by sharing feelings and information with others who face the same challenges.



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