

Alzheimer's Disease and Other Forms of Dementia

Dementia is the loss of mental functions -- such as thinking, memory, and reasoning -- that is severe enough to interfere with a person's daily functioning. Dementia is not a disease itself, but rather a group of symptoms that are caused by various diseases or conditions. Symptoms can also include changes in personality, mood, and behavior. In some cases, the dementia can be treated and cured because the cause is treatable. Examples of this include dementia caused by [substance abuse](#) (illicit drugs and alcohol), combinations of prescription medications, and hormone or vitamin imbalances. In some cases, although the person may appear to have dementia, a [severe depression](#) can be causing the symptoms. This is known as pseudo-dementia (false dementia) and is highly treatable. In most cases, however, a true dementia cannot be cured.

Dementia develops when the parts of the brain that are involved with learning, memory, decision-making, and language are affected by one or more of a variety of infections or diseases. The most common cause of dementia is [Alzheimer's](#) disease, but there are as many as 50 other known causes. Most of these causes are very rare.

Because some causes of dementia can be cured or partially treated, it is very important that your doctor is thorough when making the diagnosis, so as not to miss potentially treatable conditions. The frequency of "treatable" causes of dementia is believed to be about 10%.

What Causes Dementia?

There are several things that could cause dementia:

- § Diseases that cause degeneration or loss of nerve cells in the brain such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and Huntington's.
- § Diseases that affect blood vessels, such as stroke, which can cause a disorder known as multi-infarct dementia.
- § Toxic reactions, like excessive alcohol or drug use.
- § Nutritional deficiencies, like vitamin B12 and folate deficiency.
- § Infections that affect the brain and spinal cord, such as AIDS dementia complex and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease.
- § Certain types of hydrocephalus, an accumulation of fluid in the brain that can result from developmental abnormalities, infections, injury, or brain tumors.
- § Head injury -- either a single severe head injury or longer term smaller injuries, like in boxers.
- § Illnesses other than in the brain, such as kidney, liver, and lung diseases, can all lead to dementia.

[Alzheimer's disease causes](#) 50% to 60% of all dementias. But researchers have found that two nervous diseases, which were originally incorrectly diagnosed as Alzheimer's, are emerging as major causes of dementia: Lewy body disease and Pick's disease.

How Common Is Dementia?

Dementia caused by nervous system disease, especially Alzheimer's disease, is increasing in frequency more than most other types of dementia. Some researchers suspect that as many as half of all people over 80 years old develop Alzheimer's disease. Also, the increased incidence of AIDS dementia complex, which results from HIV infection, helps account for the increased dementia in recent history, although with the invention of newer and better drugs to treat HIV, the occurrence of AIDS-associated dementia is declining.

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Who Gets Dementia?

Dementia is considered a late-life disease because it tends to develop mostly in elderly people. About 5% to 8% of all people over the age of 65 have some form of dementia, and this number doubles every five years above that age. It is estimated that as many as half of people in their 80s suffer from dementia.

Which Dementias Are Treatable?

- § Dementia due to long-term substance abuse.
- § Tumors that can be removed.
- § Subdural hematoma, accumulation of blood beneath the outer covering of the brain is the result of a broken blood vessel, usually the result of a head injury.
- § Normal-pressure hydrocephalus.
- § Metabolic disorders, such as a vitamin B12 deficiency.
- § Hypothyroidism, a condition that results from an underactive thyroid.
- § Hypoglycemia, a condition that results from low blood sugar.

What Are Some of the Untreatable Causes of Dementia?

- § Alzheimer's disease.
- § Multi-infarct dementia (Dementia due to multiple small strokes).
- § Dementias associated with Parkinson's disease and similar disorders.
- § AIDS dementia complex.
- § Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD), a quickly progressing and fatal disease that consists of dementia and muscle twitching and spasm.

Alzheimer's Disease Symptoms

In Alzheimer's disease, nerve cells in the brain die gradually. This makes it increasingly difficult for your brain's signals to be sent properly.

Alzheimer's disease symptoms may be hard to recognize at first.¹ You may assume that symptoms such as mild forgetfulness or an occasional loss of focus are normal signs of aging. But as the disease progresses, Alzheimer's disease symptoms become more than "normal" changes. They become frightening, incapacitating, and dangerous. In the latter stages of disease, persons with Alzheimer's disease often require round-the-clock care.

What are the early, middle, and late symptoms of Alzheimer's disease? If you notice any of these symptoms of Alzheimer's disease what should you do?

Alzheimer's Disease Symptoms in the Early Stage

Below are several early warning signs and symptoms of Alzheimer's disease.

- § **Short-term memory loss** is the most common early symptom of Alzheimer's disease. Do you have trouble remembering recent conversations or events?
- § **Difficulty performing familiar tasks.** Are you stumped by everyday activities, like brushing your teeth, washing your hair, or making a telephone call?
- § **Disorientation.** Do you get lost in your own neighborhood? Do you find yourself putting household items in places they don't belong, like placing a book in the refrigerator?
- § **Increasing problems with planning and managing.** Have activities like balancing your checkbook, paying bills, or preparing a shopping list become more difficult?
- § **Trouble with language.** Are you unable to recall words for everyday things? For example, does "car" become "that thing I drive" or chair "that thing I sit on"?
- § **Rapid, unpredictable mood swings.** Do you suddenly shift from happy to sad or from calm to angry with no apparent reason?
- § **Lack of motivation.** Have activities you have always loved lost their appeal? Do you see less of your friends & family? Are you spending more time staring at the television?
- § **Changes in sleep.** Do you sleep more than usual? Do you sleep during the day rather than at night?

Alzheimer's Disease Symptoms in the Middle Stage

Once a patient enters the middle stage, Alzheimer's disease symptoms begin to demand constant attention and care. Symptoms linked to the middle stages of Alzheimer's disease include:²

- § Difficulty completing everyday tasks, such as getting dressed, going to bathroom, or preparing meals
- § Hallucinations
- § Strong feelings of paranoia and anger
- § Wandering

Alzheimer's Disease Symptoms in the Later Stages

In the later stages, a person with Alzheimer's disease is unable to care for himself or herself at all. Here are late-stage Alzheimer's disease symptoms.

- § Inability to communicate with or recognize other people
- § Inability to walk
- § Difficulty swallowing
- § Inability to smile

Alzheimer's Disease Symptoms

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If You Notice Any of These Alzheimer's Disease Symptoms

If you notice any of these Alzheimer's disease symptoms, see a doctor right away for a complete checkup. These signs can be linked to many other health problems, many of which can be treated. Even if your doctor does diagnose Alzheimer's disease, there are ways to help ease some of the symptoms.