

Introduction to Dementia

What is dementia: Dementia is a general term used for loss of brain functions that affect the ability to manage daily life. In addition to causing memory loss, dementia affects thinking, speaking, and making decisions. It interferes with activities of daily living. Behavioural changes include insomnia, wandering, apathy, and aggression.

Causes and types of dementia: The main cause of dementia is that cells in the brain die, or do not function properly, and the brain shrinks. Most dementias are non-reversible (changes in the brain that are causing dementia cannot be stopped or turned back). Alzheimer's Disease accounts for most irreversible dementias. Other irreversible causes include Vascular Dementia, Parkinson's Disease Dementia, Lewy Body Dementia, and Frontotemporal Dementia. Dementia symptoms caused by some problems (e.g., vitamin B12 deficiency, hypothyroidism, and depression) may get reversed on treatment.

Who gets dementia: Dementia is seen in all social, economic, ethnic and geographic groups. Increasing age is the biggest risk factor, and typical onset is after the age of 60. According to a published paper (Lee et al., 2023), about 7.4% of Indians 60 and above have dementia (around 8.8 million Indians) and this is estimated to reach 16.9 million by 2036.

Symptoms of dementia:

- Memory loss that disrupts normal life
- Difficulty in performing familiar tasks
- Confusion about time or place
- Problems with language
- Misplacing things and blaming others
- Poor or decreased judgment
- Loss of initiative
- Withdrawing from social activities
- Changes in mood, behaviour and personality
- Increasing dependence

In many cases, forgetfulness is the first sign of dementia, but some persons show the other symptoms first, like personality changes. Symptoms progress from early to middle to late stage, leading to total dependence and, finally, death.

Caution: Forgetfulness seen in dementia is often mistaken as normal ageing, especially in early stages, when symptoms are mild. But while occasional lapses in memory are normal when growing older, in dementia such lapses are frequent and worsening and they disrupt daily life.

Caring for someone with dementia: As the person's behaviour becomes more difficult to handle, and as their dependence on caregivers increases, caring becomes very stressful. Learning appropriate communication techniques and how to handle difficult behaviour eases the caregiving burden. Caregivers can share tips and get a sense of community by using support group forums.

Prevention and treatment: Dementia risk can be reduced by managing BP, diabetes and hearing loss, not smoking, and staying physically, mentally and socially active. Medication can help reduce symptoms in some persons with dementia, especially in earlier stages. Also, some newer drugs are available that can slightly slow early Alzheimer's in selected persons, but are costly and carry serious risks.

Understanding of dementia and support around us: Dementia usually progresses slowly and is often confused with old age. Sometimes, the strange behaviour of persons with dementia is thought to be just a mood or mental health problem, or a result of neglect by family. Awareness about the reality of dementia and its progression, and better ways to support the person need to be increased. We need more memory clinics, training programs, services, day care centres, respite care centres, dementia rehab, and caregiver communities.

If you need help: Suspecting dementia in yourself or a loved one? Contact a memory clinic, neurologist, psychiatrist, or geriatrician for diagnosis. If you are a caregiver, check dementiacarenotes.in for understanding dementia and related behaviour, what home care involves, learning essential skills, locating resources in your city, or reaching relevant websites, books, information in various Indian languages etc.