# Introduction to Dementia

**What is dementia:** Dementia is a general term used for loss of brain functions that affect the ability to live. 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.

**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. Vascular diseases related to hypertension and stress, Parkinsonian Dementia, and Fronto-Temporal Dementia are other irreversible causes. Dementia caused by some problems (e.g., vitamin B12 deficiency, hypothyroidism, and depression) may get reversed on treatment.

**Who gets dementia:** Dementia knows no social, economic, ethnic or geographic boundaries. Increasing age is the biggest risk factor, and typical onset is after the age of sixty. Worldwide, one new case of dementia is seen every seven seconds. India's current dementia population is estimated (in 2010) as 3.7 million.

**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 and behaviour
- Changes in personality
- Increasing dependence

In many cases, forgetfulness is the first sign of dementia, but some patients show the other symptoms first. Symptoms progress from early to mid to late stage dementia, finally resulting in total dependence and death.

**The Forgetfulness of Dementia is different from that of Normal Ageing:**
- Normal people may forget where they parked the car, not that they drove the car
- Normal people forget where they put their keys, but not what the keys are for.
- Normal people go into a room and forget why they are there, but not where they are.
- Normal people sometimes can't find the right word, but they don't forget what the word means.

**Caring for a dementia patient:** As the patient's behaviour becomes more difficult to handle, and as his/her 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 cure:** We cannot prevent irreversible dementias, but normal practices of good health (healthy food, staying active mentally and physically, staying stress-free) may delay the onset of dementia. Irreversible dementias cannot be cured, but medication helps some patients in early stages.

**Dementia awareness in India:** Because of poor awareness, dementia is often confused with old age. The strange behaviour of patients is thought to be madness or a result of neglect by family. Support available to patient and caregiver is low. Awareness needs to be increased. We also need more memory clinics, training programs, day care centres, respite care centres, dementia rehab centres, and caregiver communities.

**If you need help:** Suspecting dementia in yourself/someone? Contact a memory clinic/neurology department of a hospital for diagnosis. (contact information and tips on [http://dementiacarenotes.in](http://dementiacarenotes.in)) If you are a caregiver, check [http://dementiacarenotes.in](http://dementiacarenotes.in) for understanding dementia/behaviour, what home care involves, learning essential skills, learning about resources in your city, or getting relevant websites, books, DVDs, etc.

**How you can help:** Spread awareness of dementia. Stay alert about the symptoms in loved ones and yourself, and seek medical help for diagnosis. Support patients and caregivers. Participate in, and fund dementia-related projects and medical research.

**E-mail:** dementiacarenotes@gmail.com  **Websites:** [http://dementiacarenotes.in](http://dementiacarenotes.in), [http://dementiahindi.com](http://dementiahindi.com)