

Transcript for video: What is the Difference between Dementia and Alzheimer's (available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30X7ORyGtGM>) (Video and transcript created by Swapna Kishore)

One question people often ask is, what is the difference between dementia and Alzheimer's. They've heard the word dementia, and they've heard the word Alzheimer's, what they wonder is, what is the relationship between dementia and Alzheimer's.

Are they two names of the same disease? Are they two different diseases or are they names of different stages of the same disease? Some people think that there is a continuum of one disease with the initial part being called dementia, and the later part, the severe part being called Alzheimer's.

None of these is correct.

What is dementia? Dementia is not the name of any specific disease; it is a general term for a group of symptoms. These symptoms include memory loss, being confused about time and space, (the date, the space, which city, which house) using incorrect words, not being able to think of the right words, not being able to learn new things, making wrong decisions, withdrawing, getting agitated, getting deluded, and hallucinated, facing sleeplessness. All of these are symptoms related to damage of the brain, and when these are severe enough to affect the activities of daily life, normal life, then doctors give a diagnosis of dementia.

But the word dementia is for a group of symptoms; it does not tell us why these symptoms occur, what is the cause. The cause can be any of a number of diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease (which is the most common cause), Lewy Body dementia, vascular dementia, fronto-temporal dementia. There are many other causes also. For example, many people with Parkinson's develop the symptoms of dementia towards the later stages. A person could also be suffering from more than one conditions that create the symptoms of dementia. For example, a person may be suffering from vascular dementia and Alzheimer's disease, in which case we call it mixed dementia. So these are the diseases, and all of them create the symptoms called dementia.

To look at the relationship between dementia and Alzheimer's, let's consider a person who has Alzheimer's Disease. So this person has Alzheimer's Disease, and this person has dementia. But consider a person who has, say, Lewy Body dementia, not Alzheimer's Disease. For this person we will say this person has Lewy Body dementia, and dementia, but we cannot say that this person has Alzheimer's Disease. This person has dementia because this person has Lewy Body dementia; this person does not have Alzheimer's.

A simple way to remember the relationship between dementia and Alzheimer's is to think of fever, which we all know is a symptom and which has several causes. That is, there are several diseases that can create the symptom of fever--diseases like malaria, flu, typhoid, urinary tract infection, and so many other diseases.

The relationship between dementia and Alzheimer's is of the same type.

According to the Dementia India Report of 2010, most cases of dementia in India are caused by Alzheimer's Disease, but there are several other diseases that can create the symptoms of dementia, such as vascular dementia, Lewy Body dementia, Fronto-temporal dementia, and we can see that vascular dementia accounts for 20 to 30 % of the cases.

One reason we get confused between the words dementia and Alzheimer's and their relationship is because the various media use these words interchangeably. Sometimes they'll use dementia, sometimes they'll use Alzheimer's, and the difference is not clear. At times, they use the words wrongly also. But if we remember this relationship between diseases and cause, we will not get confused.

Coming back to our original question about dementia and Alzheimer's and the relationship between them, we can see that these are not two names of the same disease, or two different diseases, nor are they names of different stages of the same disease. Dementia is a general term for a group of symptoms, and Alzheimer's is a disease that causes these symptoms--it's the most common cause.
