



Dementia Information For Children and Teens

What is dementia?

Dementia is a name given to a group of symptoms. There are several diseases which cause dementia. People with dementia have memory loss and difficulties with speaking and understanding others. They will have problems with thinking, recognising people (even family members) and will forget what simple objects are used for (like a knife or fork).

For a long time the person may look healthy on the outside, but on the inside their brain is not working properly.

What's the difference between Alzheimer's disease and dementia?

There are several diseases which cause dementia. We hear more about Alzheimer's disease because it is the most common cause of dementia.

Is dementia a mental illness?

No. It is a disease of the brain. Our brain is our control centre and everything we do and say and think is controlled by our brain. When the brain is sick, we have problems with all our actions (remembering, speaking, understanding, learning new skills, walking, etc).

Is dementia something all older people get?

No. We all forget things from time to time, especially if we are stressed, and maybe a little more if we are older. An example of something an older person without dementia might forget is where he or she put their car keys. A person with dementia might forget what the keys are even used for.

Only about 2 or 3 people out of 100 people who are between 60 and 65 years old have dementia. However, as people get older, their chances of getting dementia are higher. For people 85 and over, 20 out of 100 have dementia.

Can younger people get dementia too?

In rare cases, people in their 30s, 40s and 50s can get dementia.

What problems do people with dementia have?

Not all people with dementia will have all these problems. But here are a few things that can happen:

- Increased forgetfulness
- Not able to learn new information or follow directions
- Repeating the same story over and over and asking the same questions many times
- Difficulty finding the right words or completing a sentence
- jumbling words or phrases (not making sense)
- losing things, hiding them or blaming others for stealing
- confusion about the time of day, where they are or who others are
- fear, nervousness, sadness, anger and depression
- crying a lot or becoming silly
- forgetting how to do every day tasks such as cook a meal, feed themselves, drive a car or take a bath.

Can you die from dementia?

Yes. Unfortunately there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. Over time, the disease only gets worse. It is the fourth biggest cause of death in older people.

How long does it last?

Some people can live up to 20 years after they show signs of Alzheimer's disease. But the average number of years they live for is eight.

How do doctors know someone has dementia?

There is no one test. Several medical tests must be done as well as information given by the person's wife, husband, daughter, son or someone who has known them for a very long time. There are some illnesses which might seem like dementia but are treatable. If these are ruled out, the doctor may then be able to say that the person has a particular type of dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease.

What causes Alzheimer's disease?

There is much research happening throughout the world, but still we do not know the cause of Alzheimer's disease. However, we do know that many small strokes cause the second most common form of dementia, which is vascular dementia.

How does dementia affect children and grandchildren?

If someone in your family has dementia, the disease affects you and other family members, even if you don't live in the same house as the person with dementia. It can be very upsetting and stressful. You may experience some confusing feelings and not want to believe that this is happening. This is very normal.

You may feel upset that your grandparent or parent whom you love very much has become like a stranger to you.

If the family member with dementia lives in your house, it may mean you miss out on some care and attention, or that you are asked to take on other jobs and responsibilities. You may no longer feel like a "normal" family. You may feel angry or resentful that your parents are too busy and no longer have as much time for you.

Caring for a relative with dementia can make your parent or grandparent feel stressed, tired and worried. Sometimes this may make them cranky or short-tempered with you. Try to be understanding of what they are feeling too.

You may not want to have your friends over to your house any more because you are embarrassed by the person with dementia's behaviour. If you are able to learn more about the disease, you can then explain it to your friends. Then, it might still be upsetting in many ways, but might not be so frightening.

Are there activities kids can do with people who have dementia?

Yes. Safe, simple and quiet activities that involve repetition are best, such as folding the washing, brushing the person's hair, rolling a ball of wool, walking, gardening or looking after a pet. Often people with dementia can remember things from long ago, but not things from just a few minutes ago. You might look at a family photo album with them, or play old songs and music they might remember.

The person may only be able to concentrate for 20 or 30 minutes, or even less. Stop or change the activity if they become anxious or distracted. Even though they may not recognise you, your love and understanding can be a great comfort. Give them a cuddle, a kiss, stroke their arm. The best help you can give is reassurance and to let them know that you care about them.

What can kids do to make life easier for the person with dementia?

Learn all you can about the disease. Be calm and patient. Be loving. Be involved. Be understanding. Help around the house. Take care of yourself. Explain the situation to your friends so they know what to expect.

What if the person gets angry?

Don't argue with them because they don't understand when they are wrong. Their anger is the result of the disease and not something you did. The best thing may be to leave the room and return later when their mood has changed.

Handling your own feelings:

You must understand that all the feelings you have are normal. It is a great loss to watch a grandparent, parent or other relative with whom you used to be very close, forget who you are and become helpless. You must remember that even if the person becomes angry, cries a lot, does strange things like putting a jumper in the oven, they have a brain disease and cannot help what they are doing. These things are beyond their control. You must not blame yourself for having upset them.

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