

TOPIC

What is Dementia? Does a Loved One Have It?

DEFINING DEMENTIA

It can be troubling when an aging parent or other loved one becomes forgetful. Memory loss is often associated with “dementia,” which mostly occurs in older people. While some decline in mental ability is to be expected as people age, memory impairment is not a normal part of growing older. But it isn’t a de facto sign of dementia, either. Dementia-like symptoms can be caused of a number of conditions, many of which are curable. Getting a professional medical diagnosis if symptoms don’t improve quickly, and especially if they worsen, will ensure the loved one receives appropriate care as early as possible.

Dementia is not a disease per se. It is an umbrella term used to describe a range of symptoms caused by any of a number of diseases that attack areas of the brain and erode its ability to function properly.

People often use the term Alzheimer’s disease interchangeably with dementia; however, Alzheimer’s is simply the most common cause of progressive dementia. (Progressive means it gets worse over time and is irreversible). Alzheimer’s is characterized by clumps and tangles of proteins in the brain and may have a genetic basis, especially when it occurs before age 60.

Other progressive dementias include:

- Vascular dementia (second most common) – resulting from reduced or blocked blood flow to the brain
- Lewy body dementia (more common) – marked by clumps of proteins in the brain and cognitive symptoms like Alzheimer’s along with aspects of Parkinson’s disease
- Frontotemporal dementia (less common) – tends to occur between ages 40 and 65; characterized by the breakdown of nerve cells in the areas of the brain associate with behavior, personality and language

Other associated progressive disorders include:

- Huntington’s disease – affects nerves in the brain and spinal cord
- Traumatic brain injury – caused by repetitive head trauma like what boxers and football players experience
- HIV – the virus that causes AIDS, which can destroy brain matter
- Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (rare) – inherited or caused by exposure to diseased brain or nervous system tissue
- Movement disorders – e.g., Parkinson’s disease

On the other hand, a number of reversible and resolvable conditions can result in dementia-like symptoms, too:

- urinary tract infections (UTIs)
- Infections and immune disorders (e.g., meningitis, encephalitis, untreated syphilis or Lyme disease)
- Medication effects and interactions
- Dehydration and nutritional deficiencies