



# *Facts About Dementia: A Family Guide*

Dementia is the global loss of intellectual and cognitive function resulting in deterioration of orientation, memory, intellect, judgment, affect, and communication. It is not a disease itself, rather, a group of symptoms that characterize a disease or condition. The loss of abilities in memory, reasoning and thinking eventually become severe enough to affect the ability to participate in routine activities of daily living.

## *Common Dementia Diagnoses*

- Alzheimer's Disease
- Lewy Body Dementia
- Pick's Disease
- Vascular/ Multi-Infarct Dementia
- Wernicke's Encephalopathy
- Parkinson's Disease
- Frontal Lobe Dementia
- Huntington's Disease
- Wilson's Disease

Alzheimer's is the most common cause of dementia in people 65 and older and affects more than 4 million people in America. It is very important to diagnose the "type of dementia" or underlying cause of the dementia, as the diagnosis will provide valuable information for treatment. This information will assist the rehab department in identifying areas of strength and possible areas of success, selection of appropriate cues, and the timing of interventions with the expected decline in function for activities of daily living.

Although many forms of dementia are associated with a progressive disease, there are causes of dementia that are treatable and are referred to as "reversible dementia".

## *Treatable Factors Causing Dementia*

- Drugs
- Emotional Illness
- Metabolic/Endocrine Disorders
- Eyes/Ear/Environmental Change &Toxins
- Nutritional/Neurologic
- Tumors/Trauma
- Infections
- Atherosclerosis/Alcoholism/Anemia

## *Symptoms of Dementia*

The symptoms of dementia are usually subtle and may not be noticeable for a number of years. In fact, it is usually in retrospect that the earlier signs are identified, and often by someone other than the patient. Most people think of memory loss as the central symptom in dementia. While most dementias affect memory, some forms of dementia do not initially involve memory loss.

## *10 Most Common Warning Signs / Symptoms of Dementia*

- Difficulty performing familiar tasks
- Loss of interest in activity
- Disorientation to time and space
- Problems with abstract thinking
- Problems with language or recalling words
- Memory loss
- Misplacing things
- Poor or decreased judgement
- Changes in mood or behavior
- Changes in personality

The symptoms and progression of dementia may vary based on the underlying disease process. Some, such as Parkinson's Disease and Lewy Body Dementia, are characterized by decline in motor function affecting gait earlier or at the same time as decline in cognitive symptoms. Similar decline in motor function does not occur in the progression of Alzheimer's disease until the later stages, long after the symptoms of memory loss appear.

The onset of Alzheimer's disease is usually slow and gradual. Common everyday tasks become more unfamiliar and intimidating. As the disease progresses, patients will have a problem with remembering even what day or year it is. Behavioral changes are also common, including suspicion and delusion. Eventually, the patient becomes completely incapacitated and unable to perform basic functions like eating and using the bathroom. Developing pneumonia and other illness is common in those suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

### *Easing the Impact*

The fear and frustration experienced with the progression of Alzheimer's disease and other forms of progressive dementia is devastating. There is no medical treatment to cure, however, some new drugs have been shown to temporarily improve or stabilize memory in some individuals. Allowing professional healthcare providers to provide treatment for those suffering from Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia could provide reassurance for the patient and the family members.

### *How can Rehab Support*

Assessment and treatment by rehab may be beneficial throughout the progression of the dementia. Rehab services include physical therapy,...

...occupational therapy, and speech-language pathology. Assessment of cognitive function and communication in the early stages of the disease progression will assist in identification and training of strategies the patient may utilize to aide memory and function.

As the dementia progresses, continued assessment by rehab may be utilized in the development and training of individualized programs that assist care givers and family members in shaping the environment and interactions to maximize function and decrease negative behaviors. These programs, known as functional maintenance programs, are designed to maintain function and quality of life. Areas addressed through these programs include social interaction and participation activities, participation in activities of daily living, communication of basic needs/pain, and feeding/swallowing function.

In the late stages of dementia the rehab department may assist by providing programs to assist with complications associated with the progression of the disease/ dementia. These programs may include pain management, positioning, mobility of joints to avoid contractures, swallowing therapy with diet modification, and wound care if needed.

### *Support Information:*

Alzheimer's Foundation of America  
322 8th Ave., 7th Floor  
New York, NY 10001  
1-866-232-8484  
[www.alzfdn.org](http://www.alzfdn.org)

Dementia Advocacy and  
Support Network (DASN)  
P.O. Box 1645  
Mariposa, CA 95338  
[www.dasninternational.org](http://www.dasninternational.org)

Dementia Guide, Inc.  
1721 Lower Water St.  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
B3J 1S5  
Canada  
1-800-748-4171  
[www.dementiaguide.com](http://www.dementiaguide.com)



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