

What older adults, their families and friends need to know about...

Dementia

As we get older, it takes us longer to learn new things and to recall information. Many of us worry that each time we struggle to remember a name, a word or an event, that this could be the first sign of Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia. However, only about one per cent of people with age-related memory loss develop dementia.

Dementia is a medical term for a set of symptoms. Whatever the cause of the dementia, symptoms may include:

- memory loss
- loss of understanding or judgment
- decreased ability to make decisions
- changes in how the person expresses their emotions
- changes in personality
- problems coping with daily living
- problems with speech and understanding language
- problems socializing.

Dementia is not a normal part of aging. It is an abnormal degeneration of the brain that leads to changes in a person's ability to think, speak, socialize and take part in normal daily activities.

Detecting dementia early, and identifying the specific type, is crucial for providing proper care. An early diagnosis also gives you, your family and friends time to prepare and connect with the right resources in your community to help maintain your independence.

While there is no cure for dementia, and no sure way to avoid it, keeping your brain active may help to delay or lessen the initial effects of dementia and prolong independence. Reading, learning a new skill and staying physically active

and socially connected are all concrete steps to staying mentally and physically healthy for as long as possible.

As a dementia progresses, different parts of the brain are affected leading to a range of changes and diminishing abilities. From what we know of dementia, abilities that are lost do not then return. Memory-enhancing drugs may, however, be able to maintain memory for a period of time.

There are four main types of dementia. Alzheimer's disease is the most common, followed by vascular dementia, Lewy bodies and fronto-temporal lobe dementia. The risk of developing a dementia increases with age. Dementia affects about two per cent of Canadians age 65 to 74 and 35 per cent of those over 85.

What are the signs of dementia?

The early signs of dementia are often very subtle—often not involving memory loss—and hard to detect. The signs of dementia can also be caused by other things, such as depression, medication problems, nutritional disorders or a number of medical conditions.

Dementia develops at different rates in different people. People with dementia are likely to have



at least a few of the following signs:

- forgetting appointments or a friend's name and not being able to remember them later
- losing their way in familiar places, not knowing what time of day it is
- having difficulty finding words, using the wrong words in a sentence
- experiencing problems with familiar tasks like making a meal
- exhibiting poor or impaired judgment, such as dressing inappropriately for the weather
- losing abstract thinking skills, such as not knowing how to read a bank statement
- misplacing familiar objects or putting them in the wrong place
- experiencing changes in mood, such as quickly shifting from laughter to tears to shouting
- exhibiting changes in personality, such as becoming uncharacteristically irritable, suspicious or fearful
- losing the desire to carry out simple but important day-to-day activities.

What can be done if dementia is diagnosed?

Receiving a diagnosis of dementia can be very difficult. Nevertheless, there are a number of steps you can take to help yourself or a family member continue to enjoy life:

- Focus on the things you can do, rather than on the things you can no longer do.
- Stay involved in activities that give pleasure and that have meaning for you.

- Stay physically active and eat a healthy diet.
- Plan for the future so that your wishes can be respected.
- Reach out for support, both from family, close friends and from community services that help people maintain their independence and dignity.
- Learn about dementia to find out what to expect and about strategies that can help you to live the fullest life possible.
- Acknowledge that living with dementia can be difficult.

Where can I get more information?

Aside from a family doctor, a great place to get more information about dementia is to contact the **Alzheimer Society of Canada** at **1 800 616-8816** or at **alzheimer.ca**. The Alzheimer Society provides information about Alzheimer's disease and related dementias, and about living with dementia. The Alzheimer Society also helps to organize support groups across Canada through its local branches. The local branches can also help you to connect with resources and services in your own community.

For more information on addiction and mental health issues, please contact Access CAMH: Toronto: 416 535-8501 and select option 2 Or go to www.camh.ca.