

Dementia is an overall term for symptoms caused by disorders affecting the brain. Symptoms may include memory loss, difficulties with thinking, problem-solving or language, changes in mood or behaviour severe enough to reduce a person's ability to perform everyday activities. Dementia is progressive as symptoms get worse due to damaged brain cells that eventually die.

Dementia is not a specific disease. Many diseases can cause dementia, such as Alzheimer's Disease, vascular dementia (due to strokes), Lewy Body Dementia, fronto-temporal dementia, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, Parkinson's disease, and Huntington's disease. These conditions can have similar and overlapping symptoms. Vitamin deficiencies, thyroid disease, sleep disorders, or mental illness can produce symptoms like dementia. ⁽¹⁾

Diagnosing Dementia

- The diagnostic process may require additional cognitive assessments to rule out differential diagnosis. In some cases, co-morbid conditions may need to be managed or treated before an accurate diagnosis can be made. Clinical assessments and diagnostic tests may be required to support a diagnosis.
- When it is difficult to differentiate between a diagnosis of delirium, dementia or delirium superimposed on dementia, delirium should be treated first. Hypoactive delirium (where a person sleeps more, is inattentive and disorganized) can be misinterpreted as depression and requires careful assessment. Depression must be treated before a diagnosis of dementia can occur.
- Finding out the cause of the symptoms can help a person: Understand the cause of the symptoms, accept the proper care, receive treatment and support and plan. ⁽²⁾

Risk Factors

- Lack of physical activity
- Obesity
- Unhealthy diet
- Tobacco use
- Harmful use of alcohol
- Social isolation
- Lack of cognitively stimulating activities
- Diabetes, hypertension and depression ⁽³⁾

Reduce Risks

A healthy lifestyle can help reduce the risk of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. It has been estimated that up to half the cases of Alzheimer's disease worldwide may be the result of seven key modifiable risk factors: diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, smoking, depression, cognitive inactivity or low education and physical inactivity.

Key Considerations

- Undertake a detailed medical history, a physical examination and explore the changes in the person's thinking, day-to-day function and behavior.
- Consult appropriate referrals: Geriatric Psychiatrists, Psychogeriatric Social Workers, Neurologists or Geriatricians.
- Ensure Power of Attorney for Finances/Personal Care and selection of a substitute decision maker.
- Treatment with nonpharmacological management should always be considered before resorting to pharmacological strategies.
- Review driving status.
- Early referral to the Alzheimer's Society and to the First Link program to provide clear, consistent information.
- There is good evidence to indicate that individualized exercise programs have an effect on functional performance in those with mild to moderate dementia. [\(2\)](#)

References

1. Alzheimer Society of Canada. (2017). What is Dementia? Retrieved January 29, 2020, from <https://alzheimer.ca/en/Home/About-dementia/What-is-dementia>
2. Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario. (2016). Nursing Best Practice Guideline, Caregiving Strategies for Older Adults with Delirium, Dementia and Depression. Retrieved January 29, 2020, from <http://rnao.ca/bpg/guidelines/caregiving-strategies-older-adults-delirium-dementia-and-depression>
3. Government of Canada. (2019). Dementia. Retrieved January 29, 2020, from <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/dementia.html>

Last Updated: March 25, 2020