

Dementia

Dementia is the loss of intellectual ability, which is also known as **cognitive** (thinking) function. Persons with dementia may be confused, not able to remember things, or lose skills they once had, including performing normal daily activities. Eventually, they may not recognize family members or friends and may display agitated behavior. Although dementia is more common in older adults, it is not a normal consequence of aging. The June 6, 2007, issue of JAMA includes an article about screening tests for dementia. This Patient Page is based on one previously published in the September 22/29, 2004, issue of JAMA.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF DEMENTIA

- Gradually increasing memory loss
- Confusion
- Unclear thinking, including losing problem-solving skills
- Agitated behavior or delusions
- Becoming lost in formerly familiar circumstances
- Loss of interest in daily or usual activities



ALZHEIMER DISEASE

Alzheimer disease is the most common cause of dementia. Persons with Alzheimer disease lose functioning **neurons** (nerve cells) in areas of the brain dealing with cognitive function and memory. They also experience buildup of abnormal proteins in some brain cells. Alzheimer disease affects mostly older adults but can sometimes begin in younger individuals. The cause of Alzheimer disease is not known, but risk factors for Alzheimer disease include family history, a specific gene, and advanced age.

OTHER CAUSES OF DEMENTIA

Vascular dementia is usually caused by strokes over a period of time that affect blood flow to areas of the brain related to memory and thinking. Some neurological diseases, such as **Parkinson disease** (a brain disease that causes tremors and muscle stiffness) and **Huntington disease** (an inherited disease that causes abnormal movements and dementia), can cause dementia because of their effects on brain tissue. Symptoms like those of dementia may be caused by many other factors, including medications and some illnesses. A careful evaluation by your doctor is important to look for treatable causes.

TREATMENT

Diagnosing dementia can help the person and his or her family members seek help from many available resources. There is no cure for Alzheimer disease or vascular dementia. Some prescription medications may help slow the progression of dementia during treatment. Your doctor can help you decide if medication may be worthwhile. Medical research on Alzheimer disease and the other dementias may someday help in prevention, early recognition, and more effective treatments.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- National Institute on Aging
www.nia.nih.gov
- Alzheimer's Association
www.alz.org
- National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke
www.ninds.nih.gov

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page link on JAMA's Web site at www.jama.com. Many are available in English and Spanish. A Patient Page on Alzheimer disease was published in the November 7, 2001, issue; and one on psychiatric illness in older adults was published in the June 7, 2000, issue.

Sources: National Institute on Aging, National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, Alzheimer's Association

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