

Dementia Awareness

Dementia affects people in different ways, depending on the type of dementia. The impact can be physical, emotional and psychological, and can also profoundly change the practicalities of everyday life.

What is Dementia?

Dementia is a syndrome (a group of related symptoms) associated with an ongoing decline of brain functioning. The word 'dementia' describes a set of symptoms that may include memory loss and difficulties with thinking, problem-solving or language. There are many different causes of dementia, and many different types.

People often get confused about the difference between Alzheimer's disease and dementia. Alzheimer's disease is a type of dementia and, together with vascular dementia, makes up the majority of cases.

The changes are often small to start with, but for someone with dementia they have become severe enough to affect daily life. Dementia is caused when the brain is damaged by diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease or a series of strokes. Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia, but not the only one.

The specific symptoms that someone with dementia experiences will depend on the parts of the brain that are damaged and the disease that is causing the dementia.

Common symptoms:

The different types of dementia tend to affect people differently, especially in the early stages. Other factors that will affect how well someone can live with dementia include how other people respond to them and the environment around them.

A person with dementia will have cognitive symptoms (to do with thinking or memory). They will often have problems with some of the following:

- day-to-day memory – for example, difficulty recalling events that happened recently,
- concentrating, planning or organising – for example, difficulties making decisions, solving problems or carrying out a sequence of tasks (such as cooking a meal),
- language – for example, difficulties following a conversation or finding the right word for something,
- visuospatial skills – for example, problems judging distances (such as on stairs) and seeing objects in three dimensions,
- orientation – for example, losing track of the day or date, or becoming confused about where they are.

A person with dementia will also often have changes in their mood. For example, they may become frustrated or irritable, apathetic, or withdrawn, anxious, easily upset or unusually sad. With some types of dementia, the person may see things that are not really there (visual hallucinations) or strongly believe things that are not true (delusions).

What are risk factors and how can we change?

Factors such as

- high blood pressure
- lack of physical exercise
- smoking
- alcohol

All of which lead to narrowing of the arteries – increase the risk of developing Alzheimer’s disease and vascular dementia. There is evidence that a healthy lifestyle, especially in mid-life, can help reduce the risk of dementia. Regular physical exercise (for example, cycling, swimming, brisk walking), maintaining a healthy weight, not smoking, and drinking alcohol only in moderation, if at all, are linked to a reduced risk of dementia.

A healthy balanced diet also helps to reduce a person’s risk. A balanced diet is one which is low in saturated fat, does not have too much salt, sugar or red meat, and includes plenty of fish, starchy foods, and fruit and vegetables. All these healthy lifestyle choices will also reduce the risk of other serious conditions such as stroke, heart disease and cancer.

A person who is already living with conditions such as diabetes, heart problems, high blood pressure or high cholesterol should follow professional advice to keep their condition under control. Getting depression treated early is also important.

It also seems that keeping mentally and socially active into later life may help lower a person’s risk of dementia. Being mentally active could include doing puzzles or reading or learning a new skill. Being socially active could include visiting friends or going to a place of worship. Volunteering could offer both mental and social activity and many organisations offer opportunities for people looking to donate their time or skills.

It is important to get a diagnosis as early as possible. Please contact your GP should you have any concerns.

References & Useful Links for more Information:

If you would like to find out more information on dementia you can visit the below links which contain lots of information and resources to support dementia awareness.

<https://carefirst-lifestyle.co.uk/>

<https://www.dementiauk.org/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/dementia/about/>

<https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-dementia>

If you feel you may need some support, you can also contact Care first. Care first is a leading provider of confidential, professional counselling, information and advice services. All employees are eligible to use Care first, our services include; telephone counselling, information services and online support. Call Care first on the Freephone number provided by your organisation and you can speak to a professional in confidence.