



## Resources: **Types of dementia**

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**Dementia is an umbrella term for a number of progressive conditions affecting the functioning of the brain. Different types of dementia have different causes. There are a great number of rare forms. These are the most common types.**

### **Alzheimer's disease**

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia.

It is caused by chemical changes in the brain that allow abnormal proteins to build, forming clumps known as plaques or tangles.

The plaques are usually first seen in the area of the brain that makes new memories, and memory loss, or difficulty remembering words, is often one of the earliest symptoms.

Typical symptoms of early Alzheimer's include:

- Regularly forgetting recent events, names and faces
- Regularly misplacing items or putting them in odd places
- Confusion about the time of day
- Disorientation, especially away from normal surrounding
- Problems finding the right words
- Mood or behaviour problems such as apathy, irritability, or losing confidence

As the disease progresses communication, perception, orientation and mobility can be affected.

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### **Treatment (for Alzheimer's disease)**

There is currently no cure for Alzheimer's disease. However, drugs are available that can slow down symptoms in some people.

*Aricept, Exelon and Reminyl work by maintaining levels of acetylcholine in the brain. Side-effects are usually minor but may include diarrhoea, nausea, insomnia, fatigue and loss of appetite. A fourth drug, Ebixa (trade name for the drug memantine) works in a different way from the other three and is the only drug that is recommended for people in both the moderate and severe stages of Alzheimer's disease. Side-effects may include dizziness, headaches and tiredness, and - rarely - hallucinations or confusion.*

However, knowing more about the disease and understanding why the changes are happening, can help the person and those around them to cope better. Coping strategies include slowing down the pace of life, following routines, using clear communication and focusing on what the person affected can still do and enjoy doing, rather than on their limitations.

Early onset Alzheimers is a rarer form that affects people below the age of 65.



## **Vascular dementia**

Vascular dementia is the second most common form of dementia. It is caused by a reduction in blood supply to the brain.

It may occur as a result of a stroke or a series of small or mini strokes (TIAs) which can affect any part of the brain. Alternatively it can be caused by a gradual hardening of the blood vessels deep in the brain, typically affecting parts that are important for attention, memory and language.

Symptoms of vascular dementia can appear gradually or suddenly depending on the cause. They include:

- Becoming slower in thinking
- Disorientation, especially away from normal surroundings
- Difficulty finding words
- Memory problems and regularly misplacing items
- Becoming more emotional
- Difficulty walking or a change in the way a person walks

## **Treatment**

The Alzheimer's drug treatments are not normally prescribed for people with vascular dementia, but may be useful in a 'mixed dementia' where there is both Alzheimer's and vascular dementia present. Although the brain damage that causes vascular dementia cannot be reversed, it may be possible to slow the progression of the disease by:

- Taking medication to treat any underlying conditions, such as stroke, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes or heart problems
- Adopting a healthier lifestyle by stopping smoking, taking regular exercise, eating healthily and drinking alcohol only in moderation
- Rehabilitative support, such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy



## **Dementia with Lewy Bodies**

Dementia with Lewy bodies is a rare form of dementia caused by small clumps of protein that build up inside nerve cells in the brain. Lewy bodies are also present in some forms of Parkinson's disease.

Symptoms include:

- Hallucinations which often involve people or animals
- Parkinson's-type symptoms including slow movement and stiffness in the limbs
- Memory loss and disorientation
- Fainting and falls
- Marked variation in alertness and confusion, which can fluctuate from hour to hour or day to day

## **Treatment**

Some of the Alzheimer drugs may be suitable for people with Lewy body dementia, but particular care has to be taken by doctors as some are unsuitable.

Coping strategies include understanding as much as possible about the disease and the changes it can bring, particularly that visual disturbances may be very real to the person affected, even though others cannot see them. Rehabilitative support, such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy can also be helpful.



## **Fronto-temporal dementia**

A less common cause of dementia, and one that often affects people in younger age groups. It includes a range of conditions in which there is damage to the front and sides of the brain and affects personality, emotions, decision-making, speech and language. It used to be known as Pick's disease.

Symptoms can include:

- Personality changes, such as loss of inhibition, apathy or inappropriate behaviour of which the person is often unaware
- Loss of emotional warmth and empathy for others
- Decline in language abilities – including difficulty getting words out or problems with understanding words and names
- Overeating or changes in dietary preference, particularly cravings for sweet food
- Changes in sexual behaviour
- Memory problems. Although day to day memory remains intact in the early stages, communication difficulties mean the problems seem more severe.

## **Treatment (for Fronto-temporal dementia)**

Alzheimer's drugs are not normally prescribed and can make symptoms worse. Speech therapists may be helpful for language problems.

Knowing more about the disease and understanding that this is the cause of behaviour changes, can help the person and those around them to cope with the disease. Coping strategies include avoiding confrontation and working round obsessions rather than trying to change the person's behaviour.