Being diagnosed with dementia is not a single step but a process that can take several weeks.

It often starts with the person or family members realising that there is something wrong and talking to their GP. There will then be various stages of assessments and medical tests before any diagnosis is made.

In Wiltshire, most dementia diagnoses are made by GPs, supported by specialist memory nurses. However the GP may make a referral to a memory clinic or specialist consultant in cases where the diagnosis is not clear-cut, where the person is younger (usually below the age of 75) or where a more complex form of dementia is suspected.

To get the most out of the consultations, is it a good idea to write down in advance any worrying symptoms or questions to ask the GP. You can use our checklist to help do this.

If you are going to a GP surgery, you may wish to ask for a double appointment so you do not feel rushed. When the diagnosis is finally being given it is sensible to ask about any words you don’t understand, and to ask the doctor to be clear. For example, if a GP or health care professional refers to ‘memory problems’ you may want to ask ‘does that mean I have dementia’ or ‘is that the same as Alzheimer’s?’ You may also need to remind them to send you the diagnosis in writing.

Continues on the next page...
Person presents at their GP surgery with memory worries or suspected dementia

The GP will:

- Take a history of the person and try to find out why they or their family are worried. Has the person been forgetful in the past 12 months to the extent it has affected their life? What else is going on in terms of mood and behaviour? How is the person coping in everyday life?
- Be aware of other possible reasons for symptoms, such as depression, urinary tract infections, delirium, side effects of medication, mild cognitive impairment and other neurological conditions
- Carry out a standard memory test
- Carry out a physical examination, including blood tests and a review of medications
- Arrange a CT scan to see if there are any brain changes that can be detected

GP makes diagnosis of dementia

This should include a written explanation of the type of dementia, eg Alzheimer’s or vascular dementia.

Treatment will be discussed and drugs prescribed as appropriate

Regular reviews will be set up

A referral will be made to the relevant Dementia Adviser for ongoing information and support

GP refers to memory clinic for further investigation

This will happen if:

- the diagnosis is not clear cut
- the person is under 75
- where a more complex form of dementia is suspected

Consultant makes diagnosis of dementia

Detailed advice and support will be given that is tailored to the type of dementia, eg fronto-temporal or Lewy Body disease.

Treatment will be discussed and drugs prescribed as appropriate

A referral will be made to the relevant Dementia Adviser for ongoing information and support

Dementia is not suspected

Reassurance given and follow up arranged for six months

Other conditions treated as appropriate

If the diagnosis is made in a specialist memory clinic the person may still be referred back to the GP for ongoing support and treatment. GPs can refer people back to the memory clinic at any time.
A diagnosis of dementia is a lot to take in and you will have a lot of questions. These may include questions about:

- the likely progression of the dementia
- any medication which may help
- how to 'live well' with the condition
- the support that is available
- planning for the future.

GPs, memory nurses or specialist consultants will discuss the medical side of these questions and refer you to an Alzheimer’s Support Dementia Adviser for information on the practical, financial and emotional support in your area.