



**Alzheimer
Scotland**
Action on Dementia

What is dementia?



What is dementia?

Dementia is a progressive condition that affects the brain in a variety of ways. There are many kinds of dementia but the most common is Alzheimer's disease. Other kinds of dementia include vascular dementia, Lewy body dementia, frontotemporal dementias (including Pick's disease) and alcohol-related dementias. It is possible to have more than one type of dementia; for example Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia. What all these diseases have in common is that they damage and kill brain cells, so that the brain cannot work as well as it should.

Dementia is an umbrella term for over **100** different disease symptoms

Alzheimer's disease Vascular dementia

Lewy body dementia Korsakoff's syndrome Rarer dementias

Progressive non fluent aphasia (PNFA) CADASIL

Parkinson's dementia Posterior cortical atrophy (PCA)

It's possible to have **more than one** at the same time

In Scotland, it is estimated that around **90,000 people have dementia.**

It is most common in older people but can affect people in their 40s or 50s or even younger.

What causes dementia?

We do not yet know exactly what causes dementia. Medical researchers all over the world are working to find causes and develop treatments.

Alzheimer's disease damages individual brain cells one by one, so that the brain can't work as well as it used to. A protein called amyloid builds up in deposits, called plaques, and tiny filaments in the brain cell form tangles. Much current research is trying to find out why these changes happen and what can be done to stop them.

Some rare kinds of Alzheimer's disease affecting people under 65 can be inherited. Faulty genes may cause the build up of the amyloid protein. Recent research seems to show that there may also be a genetic factor in other cases of Alzheimer's disease. However, this does not mean that someone whose parent had Alzheimer's will automatically develop the disease.

In the vascular dementias, there are problems with the blood supply to brain cells. For example, some people have tiny strokes (or infarcts) which damage small areas of the brain.

In frontotemporal dementias, the parts of the brain responsible for decision-making, control of behaviour, emotion and language are affected. It is not fully known how this happens but there seems to be an abnormal growth of some types of proteins in the brain cells. In around 30-50% of cases of frontotemporal dementia, the person may have a family history.

Dementia with Lewy bodies is caused by small, round clumps of protein that build up inside nerve cells in the brain. The protein clumps damage the way brain cells work and communicate with each other. The nerve cells affected by Lewy bodies control thinking and movement.



What are the symptoms of dementia?

Every person with dementia is different. How their illness affects them depends on which areas of their brain are most damaged.

One of the most common symptoms of dementia is memory loss. Everyone forgets things sometimes and most people's memory gets worse as they get older. But when someone has dementia, they may forget the names of family members, not just of strangers. They may burn things while cooking because they have forgotten about them or forget whether they have eaten lunch. They may repeat the same question again and again and not know they are doing it.

People with dementia may lose their sense of time, losing awareness of which day it is or of the time of day. They may lose track of where they are, and get lost even in a familiar place. They may fail to recognise people they know well.

People with dementia may often be confused. Their ability to think, to reason and to calculate can all be affected. They may make odd decisions and find it hard to solve problems. Handling money may become difficult as they find it harder to work out their change or lose their sense of the value of money.

Dementia can also cause personality and behaviour changes. These changes can be particularly distressing to relatives and friends as they lose the person they knew.

Gradually, over a period of years, most functions of the brain will be affected. Eventually, people with dementia may need help with simple daily activities, such as dressing, eating or going to the toilet.

What should I do if I'm worried?

It is very important not to jump to conclusions. Confusion or forgetfulness does not mean someone has dementia; nor is dementia an inevitable part of growing older. Many other conditions, such as infections, depression or the side effects of medicines can cause similar problems. If you are worried, see your doctor.

If your doctor finds no reason for the symptoms, they may want to refer you to see a hospital specialist. The specialist can do further tests. Dementia can only be diagnosed by ruling out other possible causes of the symptoms. This is why a full medical assessment is important.

The earlier a person gets a diagnosis of dementia, the sooner they can start to come to terms with it, make plans for the future, and access services that can help.

Treatments are available which may help some people with the symptoms of some forms of dementia, particularly Alzheimer's disease, and research is progressing all the time.



What can I do?

If you or someone you know has dementia, it may be hard to come to terms with the illness. Talk to someone about how you feel and what you can do. You can call the 24 hour Dementia Helpline free on **0808 808 3000** at any time or email **helpline@alzscot.org**

- talk to other family members and friends
 - share this leaflet with them
- tell the doctor about any changes
- find out what services and supports are available
 - try and get as much help as you can
- find out about any benefits you may be able to claim
- talk to other people with dementia or carers and families who are in a similar situation
- try to make life as full and enjoyable as possible
 - get out and about and keep in touch with friends
- ask for information, help and advice to cope with any problems





Support after diagnosis

Anyone in Scotland who receives a diagnosis of dementia is entitled to a minimum of one year's post diagnostic support from a named and trained person. This may be an Alzheimer Scotland Post Diagnostic Support Link Worker or a member of NHS staff depending on your area. They will work with the person with dementia and their partner and family to help them understand the diagnosis, learn to cope with symptoms and live well with dementia, now and in the future. Find out more about how you can access post diagnostic support here www.alzscot.org/pds

Where can I find out more?

Alzheimer Scotland is Scotland's national dementia charity. Our aim is to make sure nobody faces dementia alone. We provide support and information to people with dementia, their carers and families, we campaign for the rights of people with dementia and fund vital dementia research.



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24 HOUR
Dementia  **Alzheimer
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Helpline

Freephone 0808 808 3000
Email helpline@alzscot.org

Our 24 hour Freephone Dementia Helpline provides information and emotional support to people with dementia, carers, families, friends and professionals.

Our Helpline can give you information about the services we offer in your area and signpost you to other sources of support. You can also find information on our website at **www.alzscot.org**

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