

Disability Insight

Take a look around you

Dementia

14th December 2021

Key facts about Dementia

- One in 14 people over the age of 65 have dementia
- The condition affects 1 in 6 people over 80.
- In 1 in 20 cases, symptoms start in their 30s, 40s or 50s. This is called Young (or Early) Onset Dementia.
- The number of people with dementia is increasing because people are living longer. It is estimated that by 2025, the number of people with dementia in the UK will be more than 1 million.

Here are a few personal experiences of dementia or caring for someone with dementia:

[Sarah's story - caring for someone with dementia and working full-time](#)

[Debbie's Story – early onset dementia](#)

[Hayley's story – caring for Dad who has dementia](#)

What is Dementia?

Dementia is a term used to describe a group of symptoms affecting memory, thinking and social abilities severely enough to interfere with your daily life. It isn't a specific disease, but several diseases can cause dementia. A person with dementia may also experience changes in their mood or behaviour.

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Different types of Dementia

- **Alzheimer's disease.** This is the most common cause of dementia. It is thought to be caused by the abnormal build-up of proteins in and around brain cells. This build-up begins many years before symptoms appear.
- **Vascular dementia.** This type of dementia is caused by damage to the vessels that supply blood to your brain.
- **Lewy body dementia.** This is caused by clumps of protein forming inside brain cells. These abnormal deposits are called Lewy bodies.
- **Frontotemporal dementia.** This type of dementia mainly occurs in younger people. It affects the front of the brain more than other areas. It often starts in people in their 50s and 60s. It is more likely to cause personality and behavioural changes and problems with speech. Memory can be unaffected for a long time.
- **Mixed dementia.** Autopsy studies of the brains of people 80 and older who had dementia indicate that many had a combination of several causes, such as Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia and Lewy body dementia.

What are the causes?

Dementia is caused when the brain is damaged by diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease or a series of strokes.

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.

Who is at risk from Dementia?

Any of us can develop a dementia but it is not a natural or inevitable consequence of ageing. Some medical conditions can make it more likely

These include:

- Parkinson's disease
- Strokes and heart disease
- High blood pressure and high cholesterol levels
- Type 2 diabetes

The World Health Organisation recommends that stopping smoking, reducing alcohol intake, increasing exercise and a healthy, balanced diet (e.g. the Mediterranean-like diet is specifically recommended) can reduce the risk of dementia, especially if these changes are made in your 40s and 50s.

In some families, 'early onset dementia' is more common, so here there does seem to be a stronger genetic cause. Also, people with Down's syndrome are more likely to develop dementia early. If there has been more than one person in your family with a dementia starting before the age of 65, it could be worth getting advice from a clinical geneticist.

What treatments are available?

Dementia cannot be cured and symptoms will gradually worsen over time. Some types of medicine may help the person to stay as independent and as mobile as possible, for as long as possible. They can currently only be prescribed by specialists, such as psychiatrists or neurologists. They may be prescribed by a GP on the advice of a specialist, or by GPs that have particular expertise in their use.

It is fairly common for people with dementia to have depression and anti-depressant medication may be prescribed in these cases.

Staying socially active and group activities and support can help people live well with dementia particularly in the early stages. As the illness progresses, extra help and support will be needed. Activities and support for the carer too are vital in helping people live well with dementia (see carer section below).

Dementia during the Coronavirus Pandemic

Having dementia can make following coronavirus guidance harder. The person may not understand what the guidance means or forget how to keep themselves and others safe.

It may help to explain the guidance clearly to the person in a calm and matter-of-fact way, and point out that this advice is from the NHS, GP or someone the person trusts.

Click [here](#) for Alzheimer's Society advice on how to help a person with dementia stay safe and well during the coronavirus pandemic.

Support for you if you care for a person with Dementia

You will find all the information you may need as a carer of a person with dementia in this handbook, which was developed by Tide ([Together in Dementia Everyday](#)) with input from carers, and funded by PHA.

[Carer's Handbook for those caring for people living with Dementia in Northern Ireland](#) – May 2021

It includes information about carer and dementia organisations including carers support groups across Northern Ireland and online. It also provides information on benefits, financial and legal matters and the advice and advocacy organisations that can help.

Further reading

[Royal College of Psychiatry](#)

[NHS – Dementia Guide](#)

[PHA - early stages of dementia](#)

[Together in Dementia Everyday](#)

[Alzheimer's Society](#)

[HSC Regional Dementia Care Pathway](#)

