Dementia

Dementia is a general term for problems with brain function. A person with dementia has memory loss and a hard time with at least one other brain function such as thinking, speaking, language skills or solving problems. It can affect social functioning, how you do your job, mood or personality. The changes may be hidden for a long time. The earliest forms of this disease are usually not detected by family or friends.

CAUSES

Dementia can be caused by:

- Many small strokes (*vascular dementia*).
- Medications.
- Masses or pressure in the brain (tumor, blood clot, normal pressure hydrocephalus).
- Infection (chronic meningitis or Creutzfelt-Jakob disease).
- Depression. This can contribute to the symptoms of dementia.
- Degeneration of brain cells (Alzheimer's disease or Lewy Body Disease).
- Metabolic causes (excessive alcohol intake, vitamin B12 deficiency or thyroid disease).

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms are often hard to detect. Families or co-workers may not notice them early in the disease process. Different people with dementia may have different symptoms.

Symptoms can include:

- A hard time with memory, especially recent memory.
  - You may ask the same question multiple times or forget something someone just told you.
  - Long-term memory may not be impaired.
- A hard time speaking your thoughts or finding certain words.
- A hard time solving problems or performing familiar tasks (such as how to use a telephone).
- Sudden changes in mood.
- Changes in personality, especially increasing moodiness or mistrust.
- A hard time understanding complex ideas that were never a problem in the past.

DIAGNOSIS

There are no specific tests for dementia.

- Your caregiver may recommend a thorough evaluation. This is because some forms of dementia can be reversible. The evaluation will likely include a physical exam and getting a detailed history from you and a family member. The history often gives the best clues and suggestions for a diagnosis.
- Memory testing may be done. A detailed brain function evaluation called neuropsychologic testing may be helpful.
- Lab tests and brain imaging (such as CT scan or MRI scan) are sometimes important.
- Sometimes observation and reevaluation over time is very helpful.

TREATMENT

Treatment depends on the cause.

- If the problem is a vitamin deficiency, it may be helped or cured with that supplement.
- For dementias such as Alzheimer's disease (*degenerative dementia*), medicines are available to stabilize or slow the course of the disease. There are no cures for this type.
- Your caregiver can help direct you to groups, organizations and other caregivers to help with decisions in the care of you or your loved one.
- Dementia research is very active. Several medications are being looked at and tested in clinical trials. There is always a measure of hope that help will be coming.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- New behavioral problems start such as moodiness, aggressiveness or seeing things that are not there (*hallucinations*) develop.
- Any new problem with brain function happens. This includes problems with balance, speech or falling a lot.
- Problems with swallowing develop.
- Any symptoms of other illness happen.

Small changes or worsening in any aspect of brain function can be a sign that the illness is getting worse. It can also be a sign of another medical illness such as infection. Seeing a caregiver right away is important.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- A temperature over 101º F (38.3º C) develops or as directed by your caregiver.
- New or worsened confusion develops.
- New or worsened sleepiness or having a hard time staying awake develops.

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