Dementia Overview

What is dementia?
Dementia is a general term for a loss of intellectual functioning—such as remembering, reasoning, paying attention, and using language—that is severe enough to interfere with a person’s everyday life. Dementia symptoms may accompany certain diseases or physical conditions.

The most common causes of progressive dementia are reviewed below. Other reversible medical conditions can also cause dementia symptoms. These can include depression, drug reactions, infections, sleep problems, vitamin deficiencies, thyroid problems, head injuries, brain tumors, and excessive alcohol use. Because dementia symptoms can result from treatable medical conditions, it is important for persons with these symptoms to be assessed as soon as possible by a medical provider.

Alzheimer’s disease
Alzheimer’s disease (AD) is the most common cause of dementia, representing 60-80% of all dementia cases. AD is a progressive, degenerative disease that attacks the brain and results in impaired memory, thinking, and behavior. Symptoms of AD include gradual memory loss, decline in ability to perform routine tasks, disorientation in time and space, poor judgment, loss of interest and motivation, difficulty in learning new things, personality changes, and loss of language skills. As with all diseases that cause dementia, disease progression varies from person to person. From the onset of symptoms, a person with Alzheimer’s may live from 3 to 20 years, with an average lifespan of 8-10 years from diagnosis. There are currently a few drugs prescribed to treat the symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease. For some people, these treatments improve daily life by enhancing memory and cognitive ability. See this site for more specific information: https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/alzheimers-disease-fact-sheet.

Vascular dementia
Vascular dementia (VaD) refers to cognitive impairment caused by disruptions of blood flow to parts of the brain. One common type of VaD is multi-infarct dementia, when a series of strokes block small arteries and destroy brain tissue. These strokes can damage areas of the brain responsible for specific functions. They can also produce general symptoms of dementia, mimicking Alzheimer’s disease. In fact, VaD occurs frequently as a “mixed dementia” with Alzheimer’s disease. Symptoms may include problems with recent memory, confusion, getting lost in familiar places, difficulty following instructions, loss of interest and motivation, sudden mood changes, laughing or crying inappropriately, difficulty walking, falls, and increased rigidity. Impairments from VaD can occur in a step-wise fashion, rather than the slow, steady decline more typical of Alzheimer’s disease. Although vascular dementia is not reversible or curable, treating vascular risk factors like high blood pressure and diabetes may slow disease progression. For more information, see https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/vascular-dementia.

Dementia with Lewy bodies
Dementia with Lewy bodies (DLB) is an irreversible, progressive brain disease associated with abnormal protein deposits in the brain called Lewy bodies. Lewy bodies are also often found in people with Parkinson’s disease. Persons with DLB whose cognitive symptoms appear first may be diagnosed with
Mixed dementia

“Mixed dementia” is the diagnosis when a person appears to have more than one type of dementia. The most common types of mixed dementia are Alzheimer’s disease with vascular dementia and dementia with Lewy bodies with Alzheimer’s disease. Studies suggest that people age 80 and older with dementia probably have a combination of AD, VaD, and neurodegeneration from other causes, making a specific dementia diagnosis difficult (https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/what-is-dementia).

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