Frequently Asked Questions About Dementia
Disclaimer
This is general information developed by The Ottawa Hospital. It is not intended to replace the advice of a qualified healthcare provider. Please consult your own personal physician who will be able to determine the appropriateness of the information for your specific situation.

Created by the staff of the Geriatric Day Hospital, The Ottawa Hospital
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What is dementia?

Dementia is a disease that affects the chemicals and structure of the brain. It causes changes in memory, communication, judgement, reasoning and/or complex thinking and affects day-to-day tasks. It can also affect insight, which is the ability to understand, the consequences of the illness. It may result in changes in mood and/or behaviour. There are many types of dementia. Alzheimer disease (AD) and stroke-related dementias are the most common. Our approach uses the most in-depth assessment possible, with diagnostic accuracy approximately 90%.

Is it normal aging? How is it different from normal aging?

No, these changes are not part of normal aging. It is normal for anyone to forget appointments, names or phone numbers and then remember them later. A person with dementia may forget things more often or not remember them later. This is especially true of more recent events. In normal aging these symptoms do not progress, but in dementia they usually become worse with time. A person with dementia may begin to
have difficulty with day-to-day tasks. This may include difficulty managing finances, medications, planning meals, or forgetting completely where they have put something like their purse or keys.

**How will the dementia change as time passes?**

Dementia is a condition that will worsen over time. **It is important to remember that it affects each person differently.** The sorts of symptoms and speed of change are different for each person. It may last as few as 3 or as many as 20 years. Medications and support can slow the decline. Illnesses such as infections (common cold or bladder infection) can make it worse. It is impossible to tell how fast any one person will progress through the stages. While dementia does cause the loss of many abilities, it is best to support the person in doing the things they can still do. Research has shown that education and support are very important in helping maintain quality of life for people with dementia and their families.

**Can dementia be passed on through families?**

Familial Alzheimer’s is very rare and usually starts before age 60. Research shows that if you have a parent, brother or sister (1st degree relative) with AD your risk of AD is doubled. The strongest risk factor for
AD is age. The risk is 2% at age 65, and doubles every 5 years. People with stroke risk factors (high blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity, lack of activity, etc.) are also more likely to develop dementia. So if you are 75 and have a relative with AD but no other risk factors, your risk is only 16%.

**What should we watch for?**

People with dementia are more likely to develop a depression or delirium. A delirium is a sudden increase in confusion. It can be caused by an illness (such as a bladder infection), a new medication, or by a change in the environment (for example, going into hospital). A delirium may or may not get better when the situation resolves. Both depression and delirium can be treated if diagnosed early. It is important to ask if any new medications might affect memory. Tell the doctor if you notice any of the following signs in your relative:

**Signs of depression:**

Loss of enjoyment or interest in activities; loss of energy; problems sleeping; a wish to die; expressing regrets; many physical complaints; negative thinking or view of one’s self; loss of enjoyment of food, poor appetite, weight loss; increased alcohol use.
Signs of delirium:
Sudden worsening of confusion, behaviour (agitation, aggression) or daily function; drowsiness; hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that do not exist); problems thinking clearly (changing hour to hour).

What resources in the community can help us?
Learning about dementia can help caregivers deal with changes in the future. There are now many community services to help people with dementia and their caregivers. All families should contact Alzheimer Society for information about all types of dementia. Other resources include Community Care Access Centre (CCAC) (to help with personal care, Day Away programs, long-term care applications, etc.), meal services and seniors’ centres (who can help with housekeeping, maintenance, transportation, etc.).
How is life expectancy affected by dementia?

Dementia does not necessarily shorten life expectancy if other risk factors are controlled. It is important to keep a supportive, structured environment, use medications as prescribed, and control stroke risk factors. It is usually other health issues or an accident (for example a fall which causes a broken hip) that will cause death.

For more information, contact the Alzheimer Society www.alzheimerott.org