



Could it be dementia?

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Being Dementia Aware

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Could it be dementia?

From time to time we all have some problems remembering things. You go into a room and forget why you are there, or you cannot find a word that is on the tip of your tongue. Usually when this happens we remember later what we were looking for, or what word we wanted to say, and it is not a sign of something serious. If you think your memory is getting worse you may be worried that you have dementia, but there are many other things which can affect our memory and thinking skills. This guide is for anyone who is experiencing changes in their thinking, reasoning or memory, or who is concerned about someone else.

What can affect memory or thinking skills?

There are a lot of things which can affect people's memory particularly as they get older. If someone is concerned about memory problems they may be worried that they have dementia but it is important not to jump to conclusions. Common causes of changes in memory and thinking skills include:

Physical health problems

Physical health problems which can affect memory and thinking include stroke, infections, thyroid problems, nutritional deficiencies and diabetes. Not drinking enough fluids, the side effects of medications, smoking, drinking alcohol heavily and not sleeping well can have an impact too.

Mental health problems

Illnesses and conditions including stress, depression, anxiety or grief can cause memory and thinking problems.

For more information see Age Scotland's guide *Mental health and wellbeing – keeping well and who can help*.

Sensory loss

Most people can bring back memories through their senses. Looking at a favourite photograph or landscape, listening to a piece of music or hearing the sound of the sea. Even the scent of a favourite perfume or baking can bring memories flooding back.

Changes to senses as people get older may seem like problems with memory, when in fact changes to the senses are getting in the way of remembering.

Mild cognitive impairment

Mild cognitive impairment is a medical diagnosis which is not the same as regular ageing, but it is also not dementia. It is given when someone has problems with memory or thinking beyond what can be expected as a result of normal ageing. Mild cognitive impairments can sometimes get better, if related to an illness which is treatable, such as depression. The main difference between a mild cognitive impairment and dementia is that mild cognitive impairment is usually stable, whereas dementia will get worse over time. Around two thirds of people with mild cognitive impairment will experience some form of memory loss and more than one in ten people with mild cognitive impairment can be expected to develop dementia. This puts them at greater risk of developing dementia than the general population, so it is important that people with a diagnosis have ongoing medical checks to ensure that their diagnosis is correct and appropriate treatment given.

What is dementia?

Dementia is the term for a group of conditions that damage the brain and affect what it can do. There are around 100 types of dementia: the most common are Alzheimer's disease, Vascular dementia, Lewy Body dementia and Frontotemporal dementia. Dementia affects everyone differently and no two people will have symptoms that develop in exactly the same way. However, there are some symptoms that are commonly experienced, particularly in the early stages of dementia. These include:

- Difficulties with short-term memory – losing things, forgetting people's names or the names of everyday objects.
- Language difficulties and struggling to follow conversations
- Problems with spatial awareness – difficulty parking, crossing roads, judging distances or the size and shape of objects.
- Feeling confused or disorientated
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulties with planning and organising – not turning up to routine appointments or struggling to do everyday tasks.
- Changes in mood and behaviour
- Sleep disturbances
- Changes to appetite
- Problems with vision – failing to spot things right under one's nose, or inability to tell coins and notes apart when handling money.

For more information see Age Scotland's publication *What is dementia?*

What to do if I am worried?

The best place to start is talking to your GP. If you are worried about someone you are close to, encourage them to see their GP and perhaps offer to accompany them for support.

Before visiting the GP, it might be useful to make a note or keep a diary of what is worrying you. This can help to give the GP a clear picture of what is going on and how the symptoms are affecting you.

A typical GP appointment is around 10 minutes long. If you need more time to explain things you can book a double appointment. You might want to take a friend or family member along to the appointment for support.

It is important to be open and honest with the GP. The GP will listen, ask questions and discuss your concerns. They may carry out physical health checks, basic tests for memory and review any medication you are taking. This is to see what the causes of the symptoms might be and if they can be treated.

Your GP may refer you on to memory clinic to help with your diagnosis. Memory clinics can make an expert diagnosis of dementia and look at any memory problems you might be having. They are staffed by a range of specialists including psychologists and psychiatrists. The staff will discuss your symptoms with you and may ask you to do some tests to check your memory and thinking.

Diagnosing dementia can take some time and involve several appointments and tests over a number of weeks or months.

If you do have dementia, a correct diagnosis at an early stage is important for treatment, support and planning for the future.

What if it is dementia?

People react in different ways to a diagnosis of dementia. A diagnosis might confirm your suspicions or you may feel shocked, sad, fearful or angry. You might also feel relieved that there is a reason for your symptoms. There is no right or wrong way to feel.

There are a lot of organisations that can support you and help you plan for the future. With the right support in place many people with the condition can live well and lead fulfilling lives for many years.

For more information see Age Scotland's publication *Living well with early stage dementia*.

Useful contacts

Age Scotland

Age Scotland is the largest charity in Scotland dedicated to enabling everyone to make the most of later life. We provide information for people through our publications and online. The Age Scotland Helpline provides information, friendship and advice to older people, their relatives and carers.

Age Scotland Helpline: **0800 12 44 222**

www.agescotland.org.uk

Alzheimer Scotland

Alzheimer Scotland is the leading dementia organisation in Scotland. It campaigns for the rights of people with dementia and their families and provide an extensive range of innovative and personalised support services.

Freephone 24 Hour Dementia Helpline: **0808 808 3000**

www.alzscot.org



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