

WHAT IS DEMENTIA?



Saint Joseph's Shankill
Dedicated to Dementia Care

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WHAT IS DEMENTIA?

Dementia is an illness that affects not only the brain but effects the whole person, and of course also impacts the families of those people living with dementia.

It is a term used to describe the symptoms of a large group of illnesses which cause a progressive decline in a person's functioning. Dementia symptoms can include a loss of memory, intellect, social skills and normal emotional reactions to people, places and events. A person living with dementia may look healthy, but on the inside their brain is not working properly.

Who gets dementia?

Dementia can happen to anyone, but it is more common after the age of 65. More rarely, people in their 40's or 50's or younger can get early onset dementia. In Ireland, 55,000 people are currently living with dementia: 35,000 women and 20,000 men (approx).

What causes dementia?

There are many different diseases that cause dementia, there is evidence that smoking, excessive alcohol intake, certain medications, poor diet and stress all play their part in the occurrence of some of these illnesses. But for the most part the reason that people develop these diseases is unknown.

Early symptoms of dementia include difficulties with:

- Remembering, particularly recent events
- Making decisions
- Expressing thoughts
- Understanding what others are saying
- Finding the way around
- Performing more complex tasks
- Managing finances



Memory loss

Memory loss is one of the main symptoms of dementia. We all forget things from time to time, but the loss of memory with dementia is different. It is persistent and progressive, not just occasional. It can and will affect the ability to continue to work, and to carry out day-to-day, familiar tasks. People can even get lost trying to come home, or even finding their way around the home. Eventually it may mean forgetting how to dress or bathe, or recognising people, even their nearest and dearest. We all forget things; like our keys from time to time, that is normal. But a person living with dementia, may not even recognise the car keys or know what they are used for.

The changes that dementia brings

Initially there may only be slight changes in personality or behaviour. A person may become less motivated to do the things that previously interested them, or reluctant to part from familiar surroundings or routines. The person can have difficulty finding the right words, or repeat themselves all the time. With the progression of the illness the changes in someone's behaviour becomes more obvious to everyone. Concentration, understanding and the ability to reason and respond deteriorates. People with dementia may experience confusion, distress, mood changes and even aggression as they struggle with the frustrations of everyday life. This can lead to people becoming confused about where they are, what day it is and who people are. Everyday tasks become more and more difficult.

There are many symptoms and they all carry their own impacts on the person, initially they manifest as;

- memory loss of recent events
- personality changes, such as becoming more subdued or withdrawn
- getting lost or misplacing objects
- difficulty with problem-solving and complex tasks, such as managing finances
- trouble organising or expressing thoughts

As the dementia illness progresses other symptoms become apparent;

- increasing confusion or poor judgment
- greater memory loss, including a loss of events in the more distant past
- needing assistance with tasks, such as getting dressed, bathing, and grooming



- significant personality and behavior changes, often caused by agitation and unfounded suspicion
- changes in sleep patterns, such as sleeping during the day and feeling restless at night

At the later stage of dementia people can experience;

- a loss of the ability to communicate
- a need for full-time daily assistance with tasks, such as eating and dressing
- a loss of physical capabilities, such as walking, sitting, and holding one's head up and, eventually, the ability to swallow and control the bladder and bowel function
- an increased susceptibility to infections, such as pneumonia

The Four Stages of Dementia

Dementia progresses differently in everyone. Each person's experience is individual to them.

At Saint Joseph's we recognise that there are four stages of dementia, however, a person may not experience each one of these stages.

Early Experience - People living with the early experience of dementia, will be aware of the impairments that they are experiencing, they will appear to be orientated to the time of day but they may try to hide or deny that they have memory loss and other symptoms often associated with dementia. They will often be a little suspicious or defensive as they struggle with clinging to their independence.

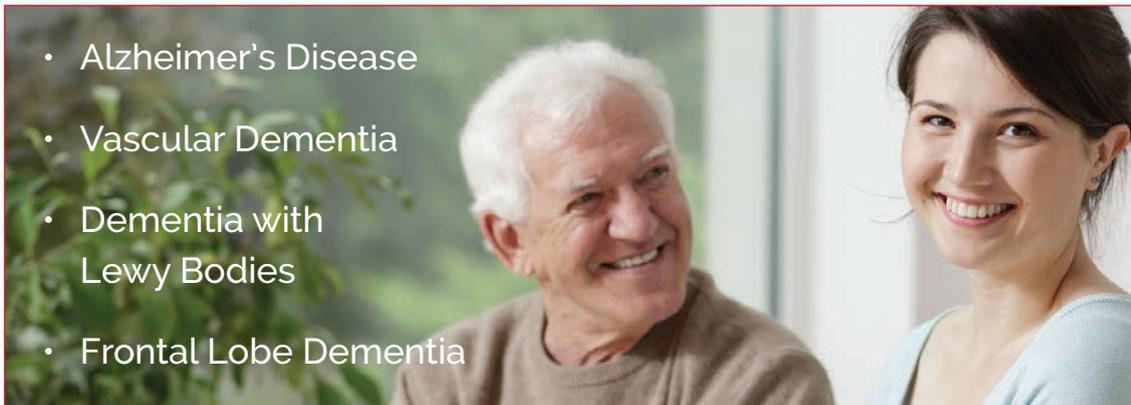
Different Reality - This stage of dementia can be defined as when people are experiencing or living a different reality to our own. For example, they may say they have to go to work or collect the children from school. When the truth is the children are now adults with their own families and they have been retired for many years. Living with a dementia they often draw upon feelings and experiences from events in their past to make sense of their feelings and experience of the world now.

Repetitive Emotion - People who express feelings through repetitive sounds, words or actions to communicate their feelings. The emotion is in the behaviour.



Late experience - People who have intense later 'stage' dementia care needs. Verbal communication skills are often very impaired, a person may appear to have 'shut out' the outside world.

There are 100's of different forms of dementia and each has its own causes. Some of the most common forms of dementia are:

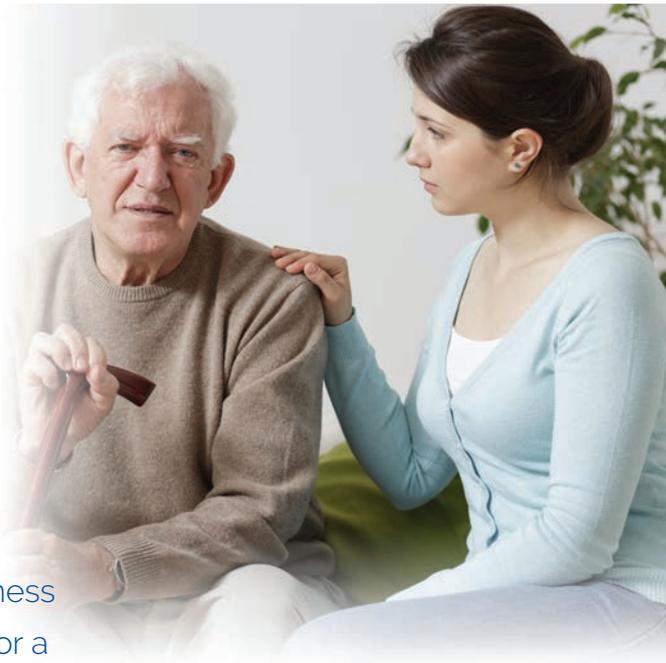


Alzheimer's Disease is the most common cause of dementia in Ireland and accounts for 66% of all cases. Individual brain cells are damaged so the brain is unable to work as it used to. It affects memory and other mental abilities. It generally affects short-term memory first. Alzheimer's ultimately affects all parts of the brain but each person is affected differently as it progresses, this is due to the nature and extent and which part of the brain is damaged. Because each part of the brain has different functions, the effect of where the damage occurs will, therefore, affect the types of symptoms the person will experience.

The second most common form of dementia is **Vascular Dementia**. With Vascular Dementia, there are problems with the blood supply to brain cells. The most common type of Vascular Dementia is caused by a narrowing of the small blood vessels in the brain, or by a series of small or mini strokes, or a combination of the two. Mini strokes are called 'transient ischaemic attacks' (TIAs). Each time the person has one of these TIAs, the person's dementia may get worse quite suddenly, and then not change again unless there is another incidence of a mini stroke. People with Vascular Dementia often have difficulty concentrating and communicating.



In **Lewy Bodies Dementia**, the person's memory and other mental abilities are affected, like in Alzheimer's disease. Symptoms progress gradually over several years. Sometimes these effects vary from day to day. People often have some physical problems too, such as rigidity and stiffness, difficulty starting movements, slowness of movement or tremors/weakness of the arms or legs, clumsiness or a tendency to falls. The person may also experience visual hallucinations, (seeing things that are not there).



Frontal Lobe Dementia (also known as Fronto-Temporal Lobal Degeneration or Picks Disease) affects the area of the brain at the front and side of the head in particular. This manifests quite differently than other forms of dementia, for example a person's memory may be fine but dementia will affect their personality, behaviour and language skills quite dramatically.

Sometimes people with **Parkinson's disease** may develop dementia which affects their memory and ability to carry out everyday activities.

Other forms of dementia include **Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease** and alcohol-related dementia such as **Korsakoff's syndrome**.

Currently there is no cure for dementia; there are some medications that can reduce or alleviate symptoms. There is a lot that can be done to help the person living with dementia and their family, through support, social inclusion and activity.

#dontforget the best way of all to care for someone living with dementia is to stay interested in them as a person and to let them know that they are loved.

References

www.dementiacarematters.com www.fightdementia.org.au/about-dementia/resources/help-sheets

