
WEEK SIX HANDOUT: WHAT IS DEMENTIA?



Different forms of dementia

It is important to remember that different people are affected by dementia differently. However, most people with dementia may experience some or all of the following symptoms:

- **Memory loss**, particularly of recent events. This may not be severe at first, but it is likely to become progressively worse.
- Problems **finding the right words** for what you want to say.
- Feeling **disoriented**. For example, not recognising familiar streets and becoming confused about the time of day.
- Having trouble **thinking clearly** and **doing practical tasks** that you used to do easily.
- Problems with **mobility** or **balance** or **visual perception**.
- **Changes in behaviour** – but this may be a reaction to the dementia such as sense of insecurity.

The two main forms of dementia are:

Alzheimer's disease

What is Alzheimer's disease? This is caused by damage to the nerve cells in the brain. The pattern of damage can vary between individuals, so that the difficulties experienced by one person will not be exactly the same as the next.

What causes Alzheimer's disease? Although there are many theories as to why Alzheimer's disease happens, we still don't really know what causes it, other than that it is more common with age.

Is it something that can be passed on to my children? There is an inherited form of the disease, but this is rare. Only in a very small number of highly unusual cases, which occur early in life, is Alzheimer's disease passed from one generation to the next.

Is there any treatment? There is no cure for Alzheimer's disease. However, some people are able to have some medication that can help with some of the problems of a poor memory. The most common of these is called Aricept.

Does it become worse? Alzheimer's disease is a progressive illness, but the speed at which Alzheimer's disease gets worse varies. Current research is looking at whether staying active and living healthily may help to slow this down.



Vascular dementia

What is vascular dementia? This is caused by blockages or bleeding within the brain. This is often linked with heart disease and has the same risk factors – such as high blood pressure and high levels of cholesterol.

Can vascular dementia be passed on? This can happen, but only in the way that risks for heart disease in general can be passed on. Recent research suggests that the factors that make vascular dementia more likely are also risk factors of Alzheimer's disease.

Is there any treatment? There are no cures for vascular dementia, but you can try to reduce the risk of this becoming worse:

- ✓ Make sure you keep your blood pressure under control.
- ✓ If you smoke, then try to stop or cut down.

- ✓ If you drink alcohol, then make sure you drink in moderation.
- ✓ If you are a diabetic, then make sure you keep this under control.
- ✓ Make sure you take a good amount of exercise.
- ✓ Eat a healthful diet.
- ✓ Maintain social contact and hobbies as far as possible.

Who can help me?

- **Your GP.** When you first recognised that you had problems with your memory, you may have gone to see your GP. They may have asked about your medical history and done blood and urine tests to rule out the possibility of other conditions that could cause similar symptoms.
- **Memory clinics.** Your GP will probably have referred you to a specialist doctor or assessment centre for more detailed tests. This will have helped to determine what type of dementia you have so that you can receive the best type of treatment. They may also have requested a head scan to be done.
- **Head scan.** If, after the GP examination and the memory tests, it is still unclear about what type of dementia someone has, they may be sent for a head scan, which is a type of x-ray of the brain.



- **Memory assessments.** Either your GP or the memory clinic will almost certainly have carried out a memory test with you. One

that is often used to help find out if someone has dementia is the “Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE)”. In this test, the GP will ask some questions and test attention and ability to remember words. How people score in this sort of test indicates how serious their condition is.

