

Diagnosing dementia

This help sheet provides information about the early signs of dementia, how dementia is diagnosed, and the importance of an early and correct diagnosis.

Signs and symptoms of dementia

Early signs of dementia can be subtle and may not be immediately obvious.

There are common symptoms, but it is rare that they all occur. They include:

- memory loss
- changes in planning and problem-solving abilities
- difficulty completing everyday tasks
- confusion about time or place
- trouble understanding what we see (objects or people) and distances, depth and space in our surroundings
- difficulty with speech, writing or comprehension
- misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
- decreased or poor judgement
- withdrawal from work or social activities
- changes in mood and personality.

Sometimes people do not see that these symptoms indicate something is wrong. This may be because:

- They think the changes are a normal part of ageing.
- Symptoms develop so gradually that it's a long time before they are noticed.
- The person experiencing the symptoms may be unable to recognise that there are changes.

It may not be dementia

Everyone at some time in life experiences the occasional memory lapse, including some that seem serious and may be embarrassing.

Occasional memory lapses and forgetfulness are normal. Changes to memory and thinking that interfere with someone's normal social or working life are concerning.

Some conditions have symptoms similar to dementia. These can often be treated. They include:

- some vitamin and hormone deficiencies
- depression
- medication effects
- infections.

Early diagnosis is helpful

It is important to talk to a doctor when symptoms first appear.

If symptoms are not caused by dementia, early diagnosis will be helpful to treat other conditions.

If the symptoms are caused by dementia, early diagnosis will help the person access treatment, support and information sooner. They can understand how to live well with dementia and take control of their life. They can plan for the future, taking positive steps to live the best life possible.

Where to begin

The best place to start is with a doctor.

It will be helpful to take to the appointment:

- a list of memory, thinking or behaviour changes that are of concern, including when the changes were first noticed and how often they are noticed
- a list of medications
- a trusted family member or friend, to provide additional information, if necessary

To make a diagnosis, it is common for a doctor to carry out an assessment and then order several different tests.

The doctor may also refer the person to a medical specialist such as a geriatrician, neurologist or neuropsychologist.

Assessments and testing for dementia

A dementia assessment may include the following:

- Detailed medical history.
- Physical examination. This may include testing the senses and movement, as well as heart and lung function.

The doctor may request specialist testing, including:

- Laboratory tests. These could include blood and urine tests.
- Neuropsychological or cognitive testing.
- Various tests assessing thinking abilities, including memory, language, attention and problem-solving.
- Brain imaging. Scans can look at how active certain parts of the brain are, or detect patterns of brain tissue loss.
- X-rays. Standard X-rays may be taken. People who smoke may also require a chest X-ray.
- Mood or psychological assessment. This is to identify treatable conditions such as depression, anxiety or delusions that may occur alongside dementia.

The doctor may refer you to a medical specialist such as a:

- geriatrician (specialising in diagnosing, treating and preventing health conditions more common in older adults, including dementia)
- neurologist (specialising in disorders of the brain and nerve pathways)
- neuropsychologist (a psychologist specialising in the assessment and measurement of cognitive function).

Some questions to consider asking the doctor

- What tests will be conducted?
- Who will perform the tests and how long will they take?
- Is it necessary to prepare for the tests in any way?
- Will any of the tests involve pain or discomfort?
- Will there be any cost involved?
- What follow-up will be necessary and who will follow up?
- How will the test results and the diagnosis be delivered?

Seeking a diagnosis for someone else

If you know someone who may need to speak to their doctor, but who is resisting making an appointment, you could:

- talk to the person's doctor for advice
- call **My Aged Care** on **1800 200 422** to request an Aged Care Assessment (for someone aged over 65, or aged over 50 for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people)
- call the **National Dementia Helpline** on **1800 100 500**.

If there has been a doctor's visit and you feel that the concerns are not being taken seriously, consider seeking a second opinion.

Additional reading and resources

- Worried about your memory and thinking checklist and resources
Visit: dementia.org.au/worried-about-your-memory
- BrainTrack: A free app that helps you monitor and understand changes in memory and thinking over time.
Visit: dementia.org.au/braintrack-app
- Dementia Australia library service
Visit: dementia.org.au/library
- Dementia Australia support
Visit: dementia.org.au/support
- Dementia Australia education
Visit: dementia.org.au/education

Further information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling.

National Dementia Helpline: 1800 100 500

For language assistance: 131 450

Visit our website: dementia.org.au