

Part 1

Dementia, what's that?

Facilitator notes

A sickness of the brain

Dementia is a word that describes a sickness of the brain, caused by many different things. There are over 70 different types of dementia and this one word is often used to describe them all.

Some of the most common types are:

Alzheimer's disease

This is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain producing a build up of protein called plaques and tangles in and around the brain cells. These plaques and tangles stop the transfer of messages in the brain.

Vascular dementia

This is caused by a major stroke or mini strokes in the brain and/or high blood pressure.

Alcohol Related dementia

This is caused by drinking too much grog over a long period of time which results in a toxic affect on the brain. It is also linked to poor nutrition, especially a lack of Vitamin B which is needed by the brain cells to function normally.

Dementia can affect anyone

Mostly older people get dementia but younger people can get it too - they can be as young as 30.

People will get sicker over time

The sickness is progressive, meaning that people will get sicker over time and they will eventually pass on. At the moment there is no cure.

Alcohol Related Dementia is the one type of dementia where the progression may stop if the person stops drinking.

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What causes dementia?

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Being older and bad habits

There are many causes of dementia but most are related to getting older, poor lifestyle choices and by not looking after your health.

We should be looking after ourselves before we get too old.

Some of the things we should do are:

- Stop smoking or don't start
- Only drink 1 to 2 glasses of alcohol a day and have some alcohol free days
- Get at least 30 minutes of exercise per day
- Eat a balanced diet - plenty of fish, fruit and vegetables and avoid high sugar and fatty foods.

Head injury

Protect your head and avoid a serious head injury. You can do this by wearing a seatbelt every time you are in a car, by being careful crossing or walking near the road, not diving into shallow water and by wearing a helmet when playing sport. Try to reduce the incidence of community and domestic violence.

A serious head injury may be a risk factor for developing dementia when you get older.

High blood pressure

Uncontrolled high blood pressure can cause a stroke and/or dementia, so make sure you get your blood pressure checked at the health clinic regularly. If it is too high, they can help you to get it down.

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What does dementia do to you?

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When someone has dementia the brain gets sick and it doesn't work as well as it should. We need our brain to remember our stories, culture, our family, friends and how to do everyday things.

Dementia causes a lot of different problems for people and these problems get worse over time.

Forgetting things

People with dementia forget things. At first it might be only little things but as time goes on they will forget more and more. You may notice that they have trouble remembering what is happening now but they can remember old stories from long ago when they were younger.

Someone with dementia might not be able to tell you what they had for breakfast this morning but they can remember a story that happened years ago. People can get their memories mixed up and they may think that stories from the past are happening now.

As someone gets worse they will forget where they live, forget family, faces and what time of year it is.

Repeating things

Because the person forgets easily they often say and do the same thing over and over again. They don't remember that they have just asked something like "Where's Charlie?" and they repeat it over and over again, even if you tell them that "Charlie has gone to play footy" each time.

Act strangely

Dementia also causes people to act strangely or differently. They may do or say things they wouldn't normally. They may be growling, cranky and swear a lot or they may become very quiet and not do or say much any more. A person with dementia could laugh at things that aren't funny or say rude things to others. You may notice a change in their behaviour and their personality.

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What does dementia do to you?

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Can't think straight

A person with dementia finds it very hard to think straight. They have trouble planning everyday things like what to have for breakfast, what to wear, how to have a shower and get dressed.

They have trouble with bigger things like what to buy at the shop for the week, when to pay the bills and how to manage their money.

A person might go for a walk and lose track of time. They may forget how to get home and become lost. Sometimes they wander off without knowing where they are going.

They might have trouble caring for their young ones and get really cranky with them when before they used to have a laugh.

When things go wrong or they can't find something they often blame others. They might think someone has stolen something but you know it's not true. This happens because of their dementia. We need to be calm and not get angry with them.

Need more help

Hunting, going to the shops, preparing and cooking a meal all takes a lot of thinking and planning. A person with dementia will need help with some of these tasks and eventually with all of these things. You will need to check if they are eating properly. People will get sicker if they don't eat and drink enough. Eventually the person with dementia will need help with walking, having a shower and getting dressed. They will forget how to do these things themselves because of their dementia.