

## Is Someone You Care For Becoming Forgetful?

# Early symptoms & diagnosis

*Alzheimer's Disease is a neurological condition characterised firstly by a progressive decline in a person's mental functioning. There is no single cause of Alzheimer's Disease, nor is there yet a cure for the vast majority of dementias of which Alzheimer's is the most common type.*



Alzheimer's Disease is an illness which often creeps up on a family quietly, and without anyone really noticing there is anything the matter. It is only afterwards that people begin to recall unusual events or behaviour patterns which were seen as 'one of those things', but with the benefit of hindsight, were clearly important signs of trouble.

Alzheimer's Disease is progressive and the early signs may be difficult to detect. At first there may be slight lapses of memory and altered mood. Later more obvious problems may develop. Early symptoms might include:

### Memory

Forgetting the names of objects and/or people.  
Forgetting where things are and events that have recently occurred.

### Tasks

Finding tasks such as brushing teeth, shaving, dressing or making a cup of tea difficult.

### Language

Forgetting phrases or using incorrect words in sentences.

### Disorientation

Unsure of date, month, where they are or how to get home.

### Judgement

Putting on clothes in the incorrect order or incorrectly and becoming accident prone.

### Thinking

Cannot understand the alphabet or having difficulty with numbers.

### Misplacing

Putting objects in the wrong places.

### Mood swings

Becoming suspicious or lacking emotion. Losing their temper for no obvious reason.

### Apathy

Needing encouragement to do easy tasks or lacking interest in all interests or hobbies

### Movements

Pacing restlessly or unsteadily. Agitation.

It may be the person themselves that first notices they have a problem. Despite this, it is quite common for the person to deny that they are forgetful, find excuses for mistakes and pretend that problems are trivial. Reluctance on the part of a person with memory problems is common and understandable. However, it is important that if there is cause for concern, an appointment should be made with the GP as soon as possible.

## Why is a diagnosis so important?

A proper medical diagnosis is needed whenever anyone develops dementia-like symptoms and does not appear to be getting any better. Diagnosis is important because:

- It can rule out the possibility that the symptoms have a different, treatable cause
- It allows family members, friends, and whenever possible, the person with dementia to make plans for the future if a diagnosis is made.
- Treatments are available that may help some of the symptoms; the sooner these treatments are started, the better.

## How is a diagnosis made?

If dementia is suspected, the GP will usually want the problem investigated by a specialist at a local hospital. A letter of referral will be given and appointment then made with the specialist for assessment.

To obtain as much information as possible, the doctor will look at the person's history by talking to them and probably someone else who knows the person well. The specialist may also do a number of tests to check memory such as the Mini Mental State Examination. This includes questions and instructions that allow the doctor to identify particular difficulties as well as obtain a general score for mental function.

The specialist may also do some blood tests or a heart tracing (ECG) and occasionally the person may be referred for a brain scan (CT or CAT). The various tests used by the GP and specialist such as those already mentioned help to clarify the cause of the presenting symptoms and if necessary, determine the degree of dementia that has occurred. At a later date the tests can be repeated to see if the condition has changed or progressed.

It is important to use the opportunity when with the specialist to ask as many questions as possible. It may help to look at **Information Sheet A2 – Questions you may find useful** which suggests questions you may wish to ask or alternatively, and if appropriate, sit down with family beforehand and draw up a list of questions you might have for the specialist in the event of a diagnosis.

## What if a diagnosis is made?

A diagnosis of dementia comes as a shock, no matter how much it is expected. It is hard for the person with the diagnosis and all those close, so reassurance and support are vital. The most important thing is to **be positive** and concentrate as much as possible on what you (or the person with dementia) can do rather than what you cannot. Although the person will gradually need an increasing amount of help it is important to make sure that other people don't take over and that independence is preserved as much as possible.

At the first opportunity, **seek help**. Call the Alzheimer National Helpline on freephone 1800 341 341 for information on local support services in your area. Find out about Society's publications such as the Information Pack and newsletter. Or maybe you just need someone to talk to.

Sit down and talk things over because now is the time to think about and discuss legal, financial and personal affairs and **make plans for the future**. A Will may need to be made or changed and an Enduring Power of Attorney should be discussed with a solicitor if not already done.

Remember, **you are not alone**. You do not have to face dementia by yourself. You can find support from all kinds of people – family, friends, professionals and volunteers working with people with dementia, and other people with dementia.