

# Alzheimer's and Dementia

**How to look after yourself**  
This guide gives an introduction to Alzheimer's disease and information on reducing your risk of developing dementia.



**“I used to be a high speed touch typist. I laughed in the face of the spell checker. But then one day last year, it all started to wrong.”**  
**Terry Pratchett**

## What is dementia?

The term 'dementia' is used to describe the symptoms that occur when the brain is affected by specific diseases and conditions. The most common cause of dementia is Alzheimer's disease, affecting around 417,000 people in the UK, but other conditions such as stroke can cause another type of dementia called vascular dementia.

## What is Alzheimer's disease?

Alzheimer's disease is a physical disease affecting the brain. During the course of the disease 'plaques' and 'tangles' develop in the structure of the brain, leading to the death of brain cells. As the damage to the brain progresses the symptoms become more severe.

## Symptoms

People in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease may experience lapses of memory and have problems finding the right words. As the disease progresses, they may:

- Become confused and frequently forget the names of people, places, appointments and recent events.
- Experience mood swings. They may feel sad or angry. They may feel scared and frustrated by their increasing memory loss.
- Become more withdrawn, due either to a loss of confidence or to communication problems.

As the disease progresses, people with Alzheimer's will need more support from those who care for them. Eventually, they will need help with all their daily activities.

While there are some common symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, it is important to remember that everyone is unique. No two people are likely to experience Alzheimer's disease in exactly the same way.

## What causes Alzheimer's disease?

It is likely that a combination of factors, including age, genetic inheritance, environmental factors, diet and overall health, are responsible. In some people, the disease may develop silently for many years before symptoms appear and the onset of clinical disease may require a trigger.

## Age

Age is the greatest risk factor for dementia. Dementia affects one in 14 people over the age of 65 and one in six over the age of 80.

## Genetic inheritance

In the vast majority of cases the effect of inheritance seems to be small. If your parent has dementia, your own chances of developing it are only a little higher than if there were no dementia in your family.

There are a few families where there is clear inheritance of the disease from one generation to the next. This is often in families where the disease appears relatively early in life.

## Other factors

Because of the difference in their chromosomal make-up, people with Down's syndrome who live into their 50s and 60s may develop Alzheimer's disease.

People who have severe head or whiplash injuries also appear to be at increased risk of developing dementia. Boxers who receive continual blows to the head are at greater risk too.

Research has also shown that people who smoke, and those who have high blood pressure or high cholesterol levels, increase their risk of developing Alzheimer's.

### Getting a diagnosis

If you are concerned about your own health, or the health of someone close to you, it is important to seek help from a GP as early diagnosis will:

- Help you plan for the future.
- Enable the person with dementia to benefit from treatments that are now available.
- Help you identify sources of advice and support.

### Treatment

There is currently no cure for Alzheimer's disease. However, some drug treatments are available that can relieve the symptoms or slow down the disease's progression in some people.

### What is PCA?

Posterior cortical atrophy (PCA) is a rare variant of Alzheimer's disease which causes shrinkage to the back of the brain and leads to a decline of vision and memory.

### What is vascular dementia?

Vascular dementia is the second most common form of dementia. The brain needs a good supply of blood to function properly. If the network of blood vessels becomes damaged, blood cannot reach the brain cells and they will eventually die. This can lead to the onset of vascular dementia.

### Am I at risk?

Around 20% of all those who have dementia in the UK have vascular dementia. Many of the risk factors are the same as those for stroke. Smoking, drinking too much, an unhealthy diet and lack of exercise are all contributory factors to vascular dementia.

### Reducing my risk

You cannot eliminate all risk factors for dementia. The most significant – age – is unavoidable. But there are some risk factors we can do something about.

Living a healthy lifestyle can reduce your risk of heart attack and stroke. It may also reduce your risk of developing dementia. By keeping your body healthy – especially your heart – you can help to keep your brain healthy too.

- Eat healthily – eat lots of fruit and vegetables and try to avoid too many foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Get active – try to do 30 minutes of exercise five or more times a week.
- Watch your blood pressure and cholesterol.
- Keep a healthy weight.
- Exercise your mind – try learning new skills, learn a language or do the crossword.

By making small changes to the way we live, we can reduce the overall risk of dementia as we get older.

### Do any of these sound familiar?

Seek help if your memory is not as good as it used to be and especially if you:

- Struggle to remember recent events, although you can easily recall things from the past.
- Find it hard to follow conversations or TV programmes.
- Forget names of friends or everyday objects.
- Cannot recall things you have heard, seen or read.
- Find it difficult to make decisions.
- Notice that you repeat yourself or lose the thread of what you're saying.
- Have problems thinking and reasoning.
- Feel anxious, depressed or angry about your forgetfulness.
- Find that other people start to comment on your forgetfulness.

### Where can I go for further help?

If you are worried about your memory, talk to your GP.

#### Alzheimer's Society

Campaigns for people with dementia and their carers, provides support and funds research.

0845 300 0336  
www.alzheimers.org.uk

#### Alzheimer Scotland

Helps people with dementia, their carers and families.

0808 808 3000  
www.alzscot.org

#### Alzheimer's Research Trust

Funds scientific studies to find ways to treat, cure or prevent Alzheimer's disease and dementia.

01223 843 899  
www.alzheimers-research.org.uk