

What is Dementia?

Have you ever walked into a room and forgotten why you went into the room in the first place? If so, you are not alone. These moments, even if they occur somewhat often, are usually not cause for alarm. However, if they become a daily occurrence or interfere with life, professional assessment may be needed. Such an assessment will tell you if you are experiencing normal or age-related memory changes, or if it might be something more severe, like dementia.

Most people refer to severe memory impairment by a commonly-used term: "dementia." Dementia, however, describes a variety of diseases and conditions that develop when nerve cells in the brain (called neurons) die or no longer function normally. The malfunctioning neurons cause changes in memory, behavior, and the ability to think clearly. The causes of neuron death may sometimes be treated and reversed. Such types of dementia are known as "reversible dementia," "pseudo dementia," and "faux dementia."

Reversible dementia conditions may be resolved or partially resolved, even if the underlying disease or damage is not. Reversible dementia can be caused by brain and urinary tract infections, vitamin B-12 deficiency, depression, metabolic conditions and reactions to medications. This form of dementia has the same symptoms as other forms, which are

confusion, mood disturbances and memory loss. On a positive note, once the underlying cause has been treated, the symptoms will reverse.

However, a greater concern is the type of dementia known as irreversible dementia. Irreversible dementia consists of damaged and dying brain cells in both cortical and subcortical areas of the brain that continues uninterrupted over an extended period of time. Treatment for the diseases causing this type of dementia focuses on slowing the progress of the underlying condition and relieving challenging symptoms.

The most common form of irreversible dementia in elderly adults is Alzheimer's Disease. Alzheimer's disease affects people in different ways. The most common symptom begins with a gradually worsening ability to remember new information. This form progresses very slowly and gets worse over time. Some symptoms include difficulty concentrating, impaired memory recall, mood disturbances and confusion.

Another common form of dementia is Vascular Dementia. Vascular Dementia is caused because the arteries that supply blood to the brain and heart are damaged. The location of the brain injury determines how the individual's thinking and physical functioning is affected. The lack of oxygen to the brain contributes to memory loss, confusion

and mood changes. A stroke or heart infection is the most common cause of Vascular Dementia.

Front temporal Dementia is another irreversible type. It is caused by damage to the nerves in the frontal and temporal lobes of the brain. Nerve cells in the front and side regions of the brain are especially affected. Common symptoms are trouble concentrating, impaired language skills and socially challenging behaviors.

A myriad of other conditions and disease states may cause irreversible dementia in human beings. Several more of these conditions will be discussed in future newsletters. For immediate additional information, log onto www.alz.org (Alzheimer's Association), www.alzfdn.org (Alzheimer's Foundation of America), and www.nia.nih.gov/Alzheimers (Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center).