

Facts: Diagnosing dementia - a first crucial step

The term “dementia” refers to a variety of brain diseases that are not a normal part of aging.

Alzheimer's disease accounts for approximately 64% of all dementias in Canada. Other forms of dementia include Vascular Dementia, Frontotemporal Dementia, Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease and Lewy body Dementia.

Diagnosing dementia can be a long and complex process. Symptoms can be similar to other conditions such as depression, thyroid or heart disease, infections, drug interactions or alcohol abuse. Your family doctor or specialist such as a neurologist or a geriatric psychiatrist is best qualified to rule out other treatable conditions that can sometimes be mistaken for the illness and confirm a diagnosis.

Know the early warning signs

It's more than just forgetfulness. Here are the 10 Warning Signs:

- 1. Memory loss that affects day-to-day function**
Forgetting recently learned information, not remembering key dates and events, looking for the same information repeatedly.
- 2. Difficulty performing familiar tasks**
Having trouble with lifelong tasks, such as preparing a meal.
- 3. Problems with language**
Forgetting simple words or substituting words, making sentences difficult to understand.
- 4. Disorientation in time and space**
Becoming lost on your own street, not knowing how you got there or how to get home.
- 5. Poor or decreased judgment**
Difficulties making decisions, like wearing heavy clothing on a hot day.
- 6. Problems with abstract thinking**
Difficulties with cognitive tasks, like recognizing what the numbers in a cheque book mean.
- 7. Misplacing things in unusual places**
Putting things in inappropriate places, like an iron in the freezer.
- 8. Changes in mood and behaviour**
Exhibiting varied mood swings - from calm to tears - for no apparent reason.
- 9. Changes in personality**
Acting out of character, becoming confused, withdrawn, suspicious, fearful,

depressed, anxious.

10. Loss of initiative

Becoming passive and requiring cues

Keep a written record of your symptoms. When you consult your doctor, bring someone along to help remind you of symptoms you've been experiencing and take notes for you. Be open with your doctor.

Benefits of early diagnosis

Detecting and treating the disease in the early stages allows the person with dementia, the caregiver and family to find ways to understand the source of the symptoms and adapt to the changes caused by dementia.

It also helps them

- Plan for the future, including arranging legal and financial affairs while they are still able
- Access medications and treatment that can delay the progression of the disease and help maintain quality of life
- Find support available in their community

Your local Alzheimer Society - your life line

Dementia is life-altering. Your local Alzheimer Society offers practical care and support. For more information, visit www.alzheimerontario.org.

“It boils down to taking responsibility for your own care. The earlier you admit to having mental confusion, the better off you’ll be. There is no cure for dementia. But the medication today helps keep you functioning at a reasonable level. That’s a lot better than going undiagnosed for a long period of time and missing out on some of these opportunities.” – Jim Mann, diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease at age 58

