Types of Dementia

Dementia is a loss of thinking, remembering, language, judgment and reasoning skills that is severe enough to affect daily activities, such as eating, bathing and getting dressed. People with dementia may have a change in their personality, find it hard to control their emotions, or lose their ability to solve problems.

The word dementia comes from two Latin words that mean away and mind. Although it is normal to need more time to remember things as we get older, other thinking and reasoning skills should not change. Dementia is not a normal part of the aging process.

Dementia may be caused by many different diseases or physical conditions. Some diseases that cause dementia can be treated, or prolonged by certain medications, while some cannot. This is why it is important to have a thorough medical exam to learn the cause of the changes.

Alzheimer’s Disease

Alzheimer’s disease (AD) is the most common cause of dementia. The symptoms start slowly and steadily become worse.

- It is thought that damage to the brain begins about ten years before symptoms begin. During this initial or first stage, abnormal clumps of proteins called “amyloid plaques,” and tangled bundles of fibers called “neurofibrillary tangles” are formed. Nerve cells in the brain are no longer able to connect with one another and function as they should.

- During the second stage, the symptoms of memory loss, confusion to time and space, poor judgment, and changes in language occur. The changes that occurred during the first stage are now causing death of nerve cells and shrinking of brain tissue. The part of the brain called the hippocampus where memories are formed is affected.

- The final stage is known as Alzheimer’s dementia, during which a person will often need total care.

As with all dementias, the disease progresses at different rates for different people. It also depends on when the diagnosis was made. A person with AD may live for 3-4 more years if the diagnosis was made after the age of 80, or more than 10 years if the diagnosis was made at a younger age. No one knows what causes Alzheimer’s disease. It cannot be cured and will not go away. Treatment may only help to manage symptoms and prolong the progress of the disease.

Vascular Dementia

Vascular dementia is also known as multi-infarct dementia (MID). It occurs when repeated strokes destroy small areas of the brain. A stroke happens when a vessel taking blood and nutrients to an area of the brain becomes clogged or bursts. Blood and oxygen cannot get to that part of the brain and brain cells die. This results in permanent brain damage.
The strokes may be so small that neither the person nor family or friends are aware that they are happening. These are called “silent strokes,” and will eventually lead to symptoms of vascular dementia as more areas of the brain are damaged as they occur over and over again.

In other cases, the strokes are not so "silent." Rather, new symptoms of vascular dementia may develop quickly with each stroke.

As with Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia cannot be cured and will not go away. Treatment is aimed at reducing the risk factors of the disease in order to prevent further strokes from occurring. Risk factors include:

- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Smoking

Medications can be used to manage aggressive behavior or agitation, which sometimes occurs.

**Depression**

Depression is a medical condition. It involves more than just feeling "down" or "sad." Depression interferes with normal activities of life.

Symptoms include:

- Unusual and excessive sadness or irritability
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Changes in weight and eating patterns
- Loss of interest in things one used to enjoy
- Loss of energy
- Problems thinking and concentrating
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Thoughts of suicide or death

Many people who are severely depressed have some mental changes, including poor memory and attention. When someone has depression and dementia together, the memory loss may be increased. Depression can be treated with medication and counseling.

**Parkinson's Disease**

Parkinson’s disease (PD) occurs when the brain does not produce enough of a certain chemical called dopamine. This chemical is used by the body to control muscle movement.

Symptoms include:

- Tremor in one or both hands, arms and/or legs; trembling in the jaw and face
- Stiffness of the arms, legs and joints
- Trouble starting movement
- Issues with balance and coordination

As the disease progresses, people may have problems walking, talking and doing simple tasks. Other symptoms may include depression, problems with sleeping, or trouble speaking, swallowing and chewing.

Treatment of PD is aimed at increasing the amount of dopamine. As PD gets worse, some people develop dementia.

Some people with Alzheimer's disease may show symptoms of Parkinson’s disease. Certain medication may help the PD symptoms, but it will not reverse the dementia.

**Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus**

Normal pressure hydrocephalus (NPH) is an uncommon condition in which the flow of cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) is blocked. The CSF protects the brain and spinal cord, and the blockage causes a build-up of fluid on the brain.
This build-up of fluid places abnormal pressure on the brain.

NPH can be caused by a head injury, subarachnoid hemorrhage (bleeding in the brain), meningitis (infection or inflammation of part of the brain), tumor, or surgery.

Symptoms include:
- Memory loss and symptoms of dementia
- Changes in walking
- Problems with bladder control, causing urinary accidents

This condition is easily confused with Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. It is diagnosed with a scan of the brain, such as an MRI or CT scan.

Treatment involves surgery to place a shunt in the brain. This allows some of the fluid to drain into the abdomen, where it is absorbed by the body. Because this relieves pressure on the brain, it may help lessen the symptoms.