



The Client with Dementia—Safety and Support Part 1: Causes and Treatment of Dementia

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After reading the newsletter, the home health aide should be able to:

1. Identify three causes of dementia.
2. List three stages of dementia and common behaviors of each.
3. Discuss medical treatment for clients with dementia.

Dementia is a decline in brain function that primarily affects people aged 60 and older. It is a devastating, progressive condition that, over time, robs affected persons of their mental and physical abilities, and their connections with loved ones.

Millions of Americans are affected by dementia, and this number is expected to increase greatly as the aging population grows. Therefore, it is important that healthcare providers be prepared to meet the needs of this growing population.



This newsletter will discuss dementia, including causes, types and stages of dementia. Signs of dementia and its treatment will also be covered.

Dementia—Causes and Effects

Dementia is not a specific illness or disease, but a term used to describe loss of normal brain function. This decline in brain function affects memory, thinking, reasoning, planning/carrying out tasks, communication, judgment, problem-solving, and other mental activities that we normally engage in every day. This decline is severe enough to affect daily activities and relationships with others. In most cases, level of consciousness is not affected by dementia.

Dementia typically has a gradual onset and becomes progressively worse over time, usually months to

years. It is usually not reversible. Common causes of dementia that are not reversible include:

Alzheimer's disease: This is the most common cause of dementia, causing 60-80% of cases. It occurs most commonly in persons over age 60, and is the 5th leading cause of death among those age 65 and older. There is an early-onset form of the illness that occurs in a small number of younger people, as early as their 40s. Alzheimer's disease occurs when protein particles, referred to as plaques and tangles, damage nerve cells. Memory loss is usually the earliest sign, such as inability to remember names or recall familiar information.

Vascular dementia: This type of dementia results from circulation problems in the brain that deprive nerve cells of needed oxygen and nutrients. It often results from a stroke, a series of small strokes, or from gradual narrowing of blood vessels in the brain. Signs of vascular dementia can vary, and are determined by the area of the brain that has been damaged. Therefore, signs may include difficulty with speech, understanding, memory or other brain functions.

Dementia with Lewy Bodies: This occurs when clumps of protein develop in nerve cells in certain parts of the brain. Early signs may include difficulty with



memory and/or judgment, confusion or difficulty finding words. This condition also commonly affects muscles, resulting in tremors, stiffness and shuffling gait. Visual hallucinations and sleep problems are also common with this disorder.

A condition that appears similar to dementia is delirium, which may be caused by conditions that are often reversible. These include disturbances in blood chemistry, side effects of medications, infection, depression, thyroid problems and vitamin deficiencies. Brain tumors and normal pressure hydrocephalus, a condition that causes fluid build-up in the brain, can also result in dementia-like behavior that may be reversed with treatment.

Signs and symptoms of dementia can vary, based on the cause of dementia and the area of the brain affected. Memory loss is often the first sign we think of when dementia is brought up. While memory loss is a common early sign in many cases, especially Alzheimer's disease, other types of dementia may have different early signs. For example, dementia with Lewy Bodies may cause sleep disorders, judgment problems or hallucinations before memory loss occurs. Signs of dementia may be grouped into three stages.



Early: Signs in the early stage are mild and are often attributed to just "getting older." Affected persons may have difficulty remembering names or where items were placed. They may lose track of time, forget what they were saying, have difficulty making decisions, use poor judgment, or become lost in familiar areas while driving. Behavioral and personality changes may be noticed, such as increasing anxiety, depressed mood or outbursts.

Middle: By this stage, the signs of dementia are difficult to ignore, and include frequently asking the same questions, social withdrawal and inability to remember or perform routine activities, such as eating or getting dressed, without assistance. Difficulty with communication, inability to recognize people other than close family members and wandering may also occur. Behavioral and personality changes become more noticeable, and may include delusions, such as accusing people of stealing from them, aggression, rudeness and other behaviors that are not typical of how the person normally acts.

Late: Signs of late-stage dementia include inability to speak, recognize family members or perform self-care. Eventually, the ability to move, walk, and control bladder and bowels is lost.

Diagnosis and Treatment

In the recent past, dementia was diagnosed based on decline in memory and at least one other function, such as judgment or communication. In the newest edition of the manual of mental disorders, the DSM-5, the term dementia has been replaced by minor and major neuro-cognitive disorder. Minor disorder is defined as a moderate decline in brain function, such that the person can function independently on a daily basis. With major disorder, there is significant decline and the person requires assistance to function on a daily basis.

When a person develops signs of possible dementia, these changes should never be ignored and blamed on just "getting older." Dementia is not a normal part of the aging process. A thorough medical evaluation is needed to identify any physical problems that may be causing them. This is very important, since many physical conditions, such as thyroid problems or medication side effects, can be treated to restore normal brain function.

Treatment of dementia is geared toward improving symptoms and slowing the decline in brain function. There are several drugs approved to treat dementia caused by Alzheimer's disease, such as Aricept and Namenda. These drugs cannot cure dementia, but they may slow the rate at which it progresses, and may improve symptoms.

Anti-psychotic drugs have been used in persons with dementia to treat symptoms such as delusions, hallucinations and agitation. These drugs are no longer approved by the Food and Drug Administration for this purpose, due to an increased risk of death for dementia patients using them. However, anti-psychotic drugs, such as Seroquel, Zyprexa and Risperdal, are still prescribed for this purpose in some cases, when needed. This is called off-label use, when a drug is prescribed for something other than its approved uses. These drugs are started at the lowest dose possible and increased only as needed, to promote safety.

Many persons with dementia also suffer from depression or anxiety. To treat these disorders, anti-depressant drugs that are also approved to treat anxiety may be prescribed. These include drugs such as Prozac and Paxil.



As the numbers of people with dementia increase in the US, it is important for home health aides and other healthcare providers to understand the causes, signs and treatment of this condition. A future newsletter issue will focus on risk factors for dementia and care of affected clients.



The Client with Dementia—Safety and Support
Part 1: Causes and Treatment of Dementia

NAME: _____ DATE: _____ UNIT: _____

Directions: Place the letter of the one best answer in the space provided.

- _____ 1. Dementia is best described as:
A. confusion
B. a genetic disease
C. an illness that causes the death of nerve cells
D. a decline in normal brain function
- _____ 2. Dementia is a normal part of the aging process.
A. True
B. False
- _____ 3. Which of the following is LEAST likely to be affected by dementia?
A. judgment
B. communication
C. memory
D. consciousness
- _____ 4. The most common cause of dementia is:
A. vascular dementia
B. dementia with Lewy Bodies
C. Alzheimer's disease
D. early-onset dementia
- _____ 5. Loss of memory is always the first sign of dementia.
A. True
B. False

- _____ 6. Vascular dementia is caused by:
- A. strokes or circulation problems in the brain
 - B. an infection in the brain tissue
 - C. clumps of protein that form in nerve cells
 - D. all of the above
- _____ 7. The earliest sign of Alzheimer's disease is usually:
- A. inability to plan and carry out tasks
 - B. social withdrawal
 - C. memory loss
 - D. aggression
- _____ 8. Visual hallucinations and sleep disorders are common signs of dementia with Lewy Bodies.
- A. True
 - B. False
- _____ 9. A client requires daily reminders to eat and get dressed, does not interact with others socially, and has a tendency to wander. This client is most likely in which stage of dementia?
- A. initial
 - B. early
 - C. middle
 - D. late
- _____ 10. A goal of medications, such as Aricept and Namenda, in treating dementia is to:
- A. slow the decline of brain function
 - B. stop the decline of brain function
 - C. reverse the damage to restore normal brain function
 - D. none of the above

