The Warning Signs of Dementia

Changes in memory and thinking have a number of possible causes that may include stress, depression, pain, chronic illness, medication or alcohol and sometimes dementia.

The early signs of dementia are very subtle and vague, and can be very different for different people. The first thing that people usually notice is a problem with memory, particularly things that happened recently.

Other common symptoms include: confusion, personality change, apathy and withdrawal, and loss of ability to do everyday tasks. Often these symptoms are wrongly assumed to be “a normal part of the aging process”.

Many organizations refer to warning signs that may indicate a developing problem:

- **Memory loss.** According to the Alzheimer’s Association, one of the most common early signs of dementia is forgetting recently learned information. It is normal to forget appointments, names or telephone numbers. People with dementia forget such things more often and do not remember them later.

- **Difficulty performing familiar tasks.** People with dementia often find it hard to complete everyday tasks like using a household appliance or preparing a meal. Or, a person with dementia might prepare a meal and not only forget to serve it, but also forget they made it.

- **Problems with language.** Everyone has trouble finding the right word sometimes, but a person with dementia may forget simple words or substitute inappropriate words.

- **Disorientation to time and place.** It is normal to forget the day of the week or your destination for a moment. But people with dementia can become lost on their own street, not know where they are, how they got there or how to get back home.

- **Poor or decreased judgment.** Indicators of poor judgment may include dressing inappropriately, buying unneeded products, or being highly susceptible to direct mail requests and giving away large amounts of money. When judgment is impaired, driving is more dangerous.

- **Problems with abstract thinking.** For example, numbers may become meaningless, so that tasks like making change or balancing a checkbook may become impossible.

- **Misplacing things.** From time to time we all temporarily misplace a TV remote or car keys. However, a person with dementia may repeatedly put things in very inappropriate places.
• **Changes in mood or behavior.** Everyone becomes sad or moody from time to time. Someone with dementia can have rapid mood swings from calm to tears to anger, for no apparent reason.

• **Changes in personality.** A person with dementia can become suspicious, confused, or fearful, or apathetic and uncommunicative. They may become withdrawn and more dependent on a family member or more uninhibited, talking with strangers in inappropriate ways.

• **Loss of initiative.** It is normal to tire of routines and obligations at times, but the person with dementia may become very passive, watch excessive amounts of television, sleep more than usual, refuse participation in normal activities, or require repeated cues to prompt them to become involved.

Other signs of advancing dementia may include:

• Unwillingness to try new things.

• Inability to adapt to change.

• Blaming others for 'stealing' lost items.

• Becoming more self-centered and less concerned with others and their feelings.

• More likely to say things over again or lose the thread of conversation.

• More irritability.

• Confusing or forgetting the names of family or friends.

• Forgetting cooking pans on the stove.

• Seeing or hearing things that are not there.

• Becoming neglectful of hygiene or eating.

Many conditions have symptoms similar to dementia, so it is important not to assume that someone has dementia just because some of the above symptoms are present. However, a person who is experiencing several of the warning signs should consult with a physician. The cause could have another medical basis requiring treatment. A correct diagnosis is important.

Some people may be resistant to the idea of visiting a doctor. In some cases, the effects of dementia can interfere with a person’s ability to recognize that there is anything wrong with them. Others, may fear they are experiencing a problem and choose to deny it.

One of the best ways to get someone to the doctor for mental status assessment is to find another physical reason for a visit to the doctor, like a check-up for a symptom that the person is willing to acknowledge, such as headaches or failing eyesight. Other ideas might include a blood pressure check, or perhaps just suggesting that it is time for BOTH to have a physical. Another approach is to
suggest a reward following the medical visit, such as lunch at a favorite restaurant, a fun activity, or travel to a favorite place.

If a person is completely uncooperative and refuses to go to the doctor, it may be possible to arrange for a home health nurse to be sent by your physician. In some areas, medical home visits can be arranged through special services like the Desert Medical Group’s *Living and Aging Well Program* in the Coachella Valley. Also, the Alzheimer’s Association is a rich resource of ideas and experience for dealing with dementia issues.

Major changes in memory and thinking patterns are not normal at any age and should be taken seriously. If someone is experiencing these kinds of difficulties it is better to see a physician sooner rather than later.

[SOURCES: The Alzheimer’s Association; Better Health Channel; Alzheimer’s Australia]

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