Dealing with Dementia in ICFs/ID

Signs, Symptoms, Types, and Causes
Part 1

Overview

Adapting to life's changes is a continuous process of challenge, learning, and acceptance. When these changes include memory loss or dementia, perceptions, relationships, and priorities shift profoundly.

Understanding the different types of dementia, the causes of cognitive decline and memory loss, and protecting the brain's functioning through early intervention can improve outcomes and preserve a sense of control through one of life's more vexing challenges.

Signs and symptoms of dementia

Dementia is a collection of symptoms including memory loss, personality change, and impaired intellectual functions resulting from disease or trauma to the brain.

These changes are not part of normal aging and are severe enough to impact daily living, independence, and relationships.

Signs and symptoms of dementia

With dementia, there will likely be noticeable decline in communication, learning, remembering, and problem solving. These changes may occur quickly or very slowly over time.

The progression and outcome of dementia vary, but are largely determined by the type of dementia and which area of the brain is affected.

Diagnosis is possible through advanced brain imaging, clinical examinations, and diagnostic testing.

Common signs and symptoms of dementia

- Memory loss
- Impaired judgment
- Difficulties with abstract thinking
- Faulty reasoning
- Inappropriate behavior
- Loss of communication skills
- Disorientation to time and place
- Gait, motor, and balance problems
- Neglect of personal care and safety
- Hallucinations, paranoia, agitation

You might observe that a person with dementia:

- repeatedly asks the same questions
- becomes lost or disoriented in familiar places
- is unable to follow directions
- is disoriented as to the date or time of day
- does not recognize and is confused about familiar people
- has difficulty with routine tasks
- neglects personal safety, hygiene, and nutrition

Normal memory loss vs. dementia

The inevitable changes of aging can be both humbling and surprising. Skin wrinkles, hair fades, bodies chill, and muscle mass wanes.

In addition, the brain shrinks, working memory goes on strike, and mental speed slows.

Normal memory loss vs. dementia

But while many people do experience mild and gradual memory loss after age 40, severe and rapid memory loss is definitely not a part of normal aging.

In fact, many people preserve their brainpower as they get older by staying mentally and physically active and making other healthy lifestyle choices.

Common forms of mental decline associated with aging

- **Slower thinking and problem solving -** The speed of learning slows down; short-term memory takes longer to function; it takes longer to react.

- **Decreased attention and concentration -** More distractedness. All of the interruptions make learning more difficult.

- **Slower recall -** A greater need for hints to jog the memory.

Distinguishing between normal memory loss and symptoms of dementia is not an exact science but there are some clues to look for.

What causes dementia and its symptoms?

In a healthy brain, mass and speed may decline in adulthood, but the brain continues to form vital connections throughout life.

However, when connections are lost through inflammation, disease, or injury, neurons eventually die and dementia may result.

The prospect of literally losing one's self can be traumatic, but early intervention can dramatically alter the outcome. Understanding causes is the first step.

What causes dementia and its symptoms?

In the past twenty years, scientists have greatly demystified the origins of dementia. Genetics may increase your risks, but scientists believe a combination of hereditary, environmental, and lifestyle factors are most likely at work.

Causes of dementia

- **Poor nutrition, dehydration, and certain substances, including drugs and alcohol.** Treating conditions such as insulin resistance, metabolic disorders, and vitamin deficiencies may reduce or eliminate symptoms of dementia.

- **Medical conditions that progressively attack brain cells and connections**, most commonly seen in Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, or Huntington's disease.

- **Medical conditions such as strokes that disrupt oxygen flow and rob the brain of vital nutrients.** Additional strokes may be prevented by reducing high blood pressure, treating heart disease, and quitting smoking.

Causes of dementia

- **Single trauma or repeated injuries to the brain.** Depending on the location of the brain injury, cognitive skills and memory may be impaired.

- **Infection or illness that affects the central nervous system**, including Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and HIV. Some conditions are treatable, including liver or kidney disease, depression-induced pseudo-dementia, and operable brain tumors.

Because some causes of dementia can be cured or partially treated, it is very important that your doctor is thorough when making the diagnosis, so as not to miss potentially treatable conditions. The frequency of "treatable" causes of dementia is believed to be about 20%.

Which Dementias Are Treatable?

- Dementia due to long-term substance abuse.
- Tumors that can be removed.
- Subdural hematoma, an accumulation of blood beneath the outer covering of the brain from a broken blood vessel, is usually the result of a head injury.
- Normal-pressure hydrocephalus.
- Metabolic disorders, such as a vitamin B12 deficiency.
- Hypothyroidism, a condition that results from an underactive thyroid.
- Hypoglycemia, a condition that results from low blood sugar.

Can dementia be prevented or delayed?

Recent research suggests that good health habits and mental stimulation may prevent dementia altogether or at least delay its onset.

Just as physical exercise keeps you physically fit, exercising your mind and memory can help you stay mentally sharp, no matter how old you are.

Strategies to improve mental clarity and keep your brain functioning optimally:

- Exercise consistently
- Eat a brain-healthy diet
- Challenge your mind
- Get regular and restful sleep
- Minimize stress
- Avoid smoking and drinking

Types of dementia

All dementias involve cognitive decline that impacts daily living. However, it's important to pinpoint the specific type of dementia in order to optimize treatment.

More than fifty conditions involve dementia, but the most common types of dementia are Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia.

Alzheimer's disease

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia. Early diagnosis can prolong independence and is the first step towards treatment, management, and living life fully.

Vascular Dementia

Vascular dementia results from a series of small strokes or changes in the brain's blood supply. Sudden onset of symptoms may be a sign of this dementia. Vascular dementia severely impacts memory and cognitive functioning.

Less common forms of dementia

- **Pick's Disease -** Pick's Disease affects personality, orientation and behavior. It may be more common in women and occurs at an early age.
- **Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease -** The disease progresses rapidly along with mental deterioration and involuntary movements.
- **Huntington's Disease -** Huntington's is an inherited, degenerative disease. The disease causes involuntary movement and usually begins during mid-life.
- **Parkinson's Dementia -** Parkinson's is a progressive disorder of the central nervous system. In later stages of Parkinson's disease, some patients develop dementia.
- **Lewy Body Disease -** This disease causes symptoms similar to Alzheimer's disease. Individuals with Lewy Body Disease experience hallucinations and can become fearful.

What is mild cognitive impairment or early dementia?

Early dementia, also known as mild cognitive impairment, involves problems with memory, language, or other cognitive functions. People with mild cognitive impairment are still able to function in their daily lives without relying on others.

Many people with mild cognitive impairment eventually develop Alzheimer's disease or another type of dementia. However, others plateau at a relatively mild stage of decline and are able to live independently. Some people with mild cognitive impairment even return to normal functioning.

Symptoms of early dementia or mild cognitive impairment include:

- Frequently losing or misplacing things
- Frequently forgetting conversations, appointments, or events
- Difficulty remembering the names of new acquaintances
- Difficulty following the flow of a conversation

What to do if you observe symptoms of dementia

When symptoms of dementia appear suddenly, it is critical to seek medical attention. Conditions such as stroke, drug interactions, tumors, and seizures should be treated immediately. Timely intervention may also control or eliminate symptoms from other physical and psychological factors.

Because dementia and its symptoms can be caused by any number of conditions, obtaining an accurate diagnosis is critical for management and treatment.

The doctor can assess personal risk factors, evaluate symptoms, offer tips on healthy lifestyle adjustments, and help obtain appropriate care.

If you suspect dementia:

- Report symptoms to the doctor as soon as possible and schedule regular follow up visits.
- Keep a list of symptoms and concerns and ask staff and family members for their observations. Write down specific information about the frequency, nature, and setting of the memory, cognitive, or behavior concerns.
- Learn as much about dementia as you can. Knowing what to expect will help you plan, adjust, and assist the person to live life as fully as possible.

What regulations do I need to consider?

All of them! Special attention should be paid to the following as they relate to signs, symptoms, types, and causes.

W192, W193, and W342

Staff must be trained to meet the unique health care and behavioral needs of each individual.

Staff must be trained to detect signs and symptoms of illness or dysfunction and basic skills required to meet the health needs of each individual.

W206

The individual's interdisciplinary team is composed of those individuals who possess the knowledge, skills and expertise necessary to accurately identify the comprehensive array of the individual's needs and design a program which is responsive to those needs.

W211

Assessments must address areas and active treatment needs which are relevant to the person's chronological age.

The assessment process should be sensitive to the behaviors of individuals throughout their life span. For example, elderly citizens are expected to choose whichever form of productive activity meets their needs and interests (employment, handiwork, pursuit of leisure, etc.) for as long as they are able.

W212

Identify the presenting problems and disabilities and where possible, their causes.

W215

Assessments provide specific information about the person's ability to function in different environments, specific skills or lack of skills, and how function can be improved, either through training, environmental adaptations, or provision of adaptive, assistive, supportive, orthotic, or prosthetic equipment.

W322

Medical services are provided as necessary to maintain an optimum level of health for each individual and to prevent disability. Medical services include evaluation, diagnosis and treatment, as needed by individuals.

Remember…

As a person gets older, changes occur in all parts of the body.

Therefore, it may be necessary to consult with a medical specialist who explores the diagnosis and treatment of diseases and problems of older individuals.

Resources and references

- **Dementia: Different Types** – Describes types, forms, early signs, and related links. (Better Health Channel.com)

- **Dementia: Hope Through Research** - Provides information on identification, treatment, types, and prognosis for dementia. (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke)

- **Dementia: What Are Common Signs?** – Lists causes and common signs of dementia. (FamilyDoctor.org)

Resources and references

- **Identifying Mild Cognitive Impairment -** Short film that provides information on MCI and various forms of dementia. (The Mayo Clinic, HBO Alzheimer's Project)

- **Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI)** – Comprehensive information about MCI symptoms, normal aging, treatment, and recommendations. (University of California at San Francisco)

- **You're Wiser Now** – Lead article in a special report on normal and abnormal brain aging that includes pieces on Alzheimer's, conditions that mimic dementia, and strategies for maintaining a sharp mind. (AARP)

Send your comments or questions to fsb@dhw.idaho.gov