

Dementia Basics

What is dementia?

Dementia is a general term for a mental disorder resulting in impairment with reasoning, judgment and memory.

What causes dementia?

Dementia is caused by brain disease or injury and is not a normal part of aging. Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia in the United States, though dementia can result from other conditions such as chronic hypertension (termed Vascular Dementia), Parkinson's disease or repeated trauma to the brain.

What are the risk factors for developing dementia?

The risk of dementia increases with age. Dementia is also more likely to develop if there is a family history of dementia or if an individual has high blood pressure, diabetes or a history of smoking. Individuals who exercise and remain socially active tend to develop dementia at later ages, so these activities are thought to be protective.

What effects does dementia have on a person?

In the early stages of the disease, individuals affected by dementia often have difficulty with speaking, writing, concentrating, remembering information and planning. Individuals with dementia have difficulty recognizing even familiar environments and can easily become confused.

In the late stages of the disease, individuals with dementia are more easily confused and can become hostile and aggressive or passive and non-verbal. Individuals with advanced dementia require assistance with many of their activities of daily living such as eating or bathing and are typically cared for in a skilled nursing facility or with the assistance of home health nursing.

Local Resources

<http://www.co.contra-costa.ca.us/index.aspx?NID=2533>

- Contra Costa County aging & adult services; provides access to home support, financial services, transportation, adult daycare, respite services & support groups.
[\(800\) 510-2020](tel:8005102020)

<http://alzheimer.ucdavis.edu/main/location.php>

- UC Davis Alzheimer's Research Center in Martinez, coordinates clinical trials and provides Alzheimer's education.
[\(925\) 372-2485](tel:9253722485)

National Resources

Government Publications

www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/publication/caring-person-alzheimers-disease - Free comprehensive handbook addressing all aspects of care of individuals with Alzheimer's which may be downloaded or printed.

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/topics/caregiving> - Handouts from the National Institute on Aging covering most aspects of care of affected individuals, including discussions on caregiver burden.

<http://www.alzheimers.gov/> - General information on Alzheimer's disease and information for caregivers from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

Nonprofit Groups

<http://www.alz.org/> - Information on Alzheimer's care, support & research for both caregivers & patients from Alzheimer's Association.

<http://alzfdn.org/> - Information for both caregivers & patients from Alzheimer's Foundation of America.

<http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/diseases-conditions/alzheimers-disease.html> - General information on Alzheimer's dementia from the American Academy of Family Physicians.

http://www.helpguide.org/elder/alzheimers_disease_dementia_support_caregiver.htm - Support for caregivers from the nonprofit group HelpGuide.

Tips for caregivers

Dementia is a severely debilitating condition and caring for an individual affected by dementia can be a great burden to friends, family and loved ones.

In the early stages of dementia individuals are usually able to eat, bath and dress themselves, but may require assistance with more complex tasks such as paying bills, driving, cooking and housekeeping.

People with dementia are easily confused and occasionally this confusion can lead to agitation. Keep things simple!

- always speak calmly and clearly during conversations
- ensure the environment is free of noise & clutter
- have daily routines for activities such as eating & bathing and avoiding unfamiliar environments when possible.
- continually remind the individual of who you are, where they are, and that you are there to help them.

Aggressive behaviors such as hitting or biting can often be managed with behavioral modification or medications. Discuss these options with the individual's doctor.

Exercise is important for both affected individuals and their caregivers, and helps to maintain cognitive function and prevent depression. Try to plan short walks or perform exercises with simple, easy to follow steps.

Individuals with dementia often rummage for objects and hide objects around the house. Allow these behaviors as they can be comforting, but take steps to prevent harm; lock up harmful substances and medications and remove valuable items which may be misplaced.

Many actions of individuals with dementia can be irritating. If you find yourself becoming frustrated take a deep breath, count to ten, go for a short walk, talk to a friend or family member, and remind yourself always that your loved one does not intend to upset you but is suffering from a disease.

Remember most of all that your own health and well-being are important. Utilize support groups and find ways to take breaks from care giving, whether dividing the care giving role among family members or using respite care.

Caring for Individuals with Dementia



Contra Costa Health
Services

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