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Dementia: Warning Signs

What is dementia?

Dementia is a problem in the brain that makes it hard for a person to remember, learn and communicate. After a while, this makes it hard for the person to take care of himself or herself.

Dementia may also cause a person's mood and personality to change. At first, memory loss and trouble thinking clearly may bother the person who has dementia. Later, disruptive behavior and other problems may start. A person who has dementia may not be aware of these problems.

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What causes dementia?

Dementia is caused by the destruction of brain cells. A head injury, a stroke, a brain tumor or a problem like Alzheimer's disease can damage brain cells. Some people have a family history of dementia.

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What are some common symptoms of dementia?

Dementia causes many problems for the person who has it and for the person's family. Many of the problems are caused by memory loss. Some common symptoms of dementia are listed below. Not everyone who has dementia will experience all of these symptoms.

- **Recent memory loss.** All of us forget things for a while and then remember them later. People who have dementia often forget things, but they never remember them. They might ask you the same question over and over, each time forgetting that you've already given them the answer. They won't even remember that they already asked the question.
- **Difficulty performing familiar tasks.** People who have dementia might cook a meal but forget to serve it. They might even forget that they cooked it.
- **Problems with language.** People who have dementia may forget simple words or use the wrong words. This makes it hard to understand what they want.
- **Time and place disorientation.** People who have dementia may get lost on their own street. They may forget how they got to a certain place and how to get back home.
- **Poor judgment.** Even a person who doesn't have dementia might get distracted. But people who have dementia can forget simple things, like forgetting to put on a coat before going out in cold weather.
- **Problems with abstract thinking.** Anybody might have trouble balancing a checkbook, but people who have dementia may forget what the numbers are and what has to be done with them.
- **Misplacing things.** People who have dementia may put things in the wrong places. They

might put an iron in the freezer or a wristwatch in the sugar bowl. Then they can't find these things later.

- **Changes in mood.** Everyone is moody at times, but people who have dementia may have fast mood swings, going from calm to tears to anger in a few minutes.
- **Personality changes.** People who have dementia may have drastic changes in personality. They might become irritable, suspicious or fearful.
- **Loss of initiative.** People who have dementia may become passive. They might not want to go places or see other people.

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What if I have any of these symptoms of dementia?

Talk with your doctor. Your doctor can do tests to find out if your experiences are caused by dementia. The sooner you know, the sooner you can talk to your doctor about treatment options.

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What if a family member is showing signs dementia?

If your family member is showing some of the signs of dementia, try to get him or her to go see a doctor. You may want to go along and talk with the doctor before your relative sees him or her. Then you can tell the doctor about the way your relative is acting without embarrassing your relative.

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