

Aging, Memory Loss and Dementia: What's the difference?

Normal Aging

We all know that many things change as we age. In normal aging, our bodies and brains slow down, though intelligence remains stable. We are less physically and mentally flexible, and we take more time to process information. Memory changes occur as well, and it's common to have greater difficulty remembering names of people, places and other things as we age.

Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI)

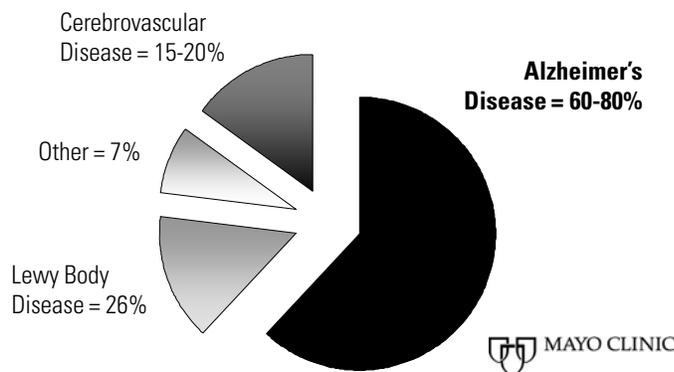
In MCI, a person has problems with memory or another core brain function. These problems are severe enough to be noticeable to other people and show up on tests of mental function, but not serious enough to interfere with daily life.

People with MCI have an increased risk of developing Alzheimer's disease in the near future, especially when their main problem involves memory. However, not everyone diagnosed with MCI progresses to Alzheimer's or another type of dementia.

Dementia

Dementia is not a disease. It is a general term that describes a set of symptoms that may be caused by a number of different brain disorders. These symptoms involve mental decline severe enough to disrupt daily life that affects more than one of the following core brain functions:

- Recent memory (the ability to learn and recall information)
- Language (the ability to write or speak, or to understand written or spoken words)
- Visuospatial Function (the ability to understand and use symbols, maps, etc. and the ability to correctly judge where objects are)
- Executive function (the ability to plan, reason, solve problems and focus on a task)



Source: David Knopman, MD, Mayo Clinic

Because there are many causes of dementia, it is important to find out the disease responsible for these symptoms.

Alzheimer's disease is the leading cause of dementia, accounting for 60-80 percent of cases.

Common Causes of Dementia

Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's disease is a slow, progressive illness that damages nerve cells in the brain. Symptoms gradually get worse over time as more brain cells are destroyed. Though people can have Alzheimer's in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, the disease is most prevalent in people over age 65.

The first problem many people with Alzheimer's disease notice is forgetfulness severe enough to affect their work, hobbies, or social life. Other common symptoms include mood changes, difficulty multi-tasking, misplacing things, repeating things, confusion, trouble with organizing and expressing thoughts, and becoming disoriented or lost in familiar places. Although there is currently no cure, treatments are available and are most effective when the disease is identified early.

Cerebrovascular Disease / Vascular Dementia

Many experts consider cerebrovascular disease as the second most common cause of dementia. Vascular dementia occurs when clots block blood flow to parts of the brain, killing brain cells. Symptoms of vascular dementia vary widely, depending on the brain regions involved. Common symptoms include memory loss, difficulty focusing attention and confusion. Changes may occur suddenly, or in "steps," where a person has a rather sudden change, then stabilizes for a period of time. People who develop vascular dementia may have a history of high blood pressure or cholesterol, heart disease, or diabetes.

Mixed Dementia

It is very common for people to have both Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia at the same time. Evidence from brain autopsies indicates that brains of up to 45 percent of people with dementia have signs of both Alzheimer's and vascular disease.

Lewy Body Disease / Dementia with Lewy Bodies (DLB)

In DLB, abnormal deposits of proteins called "Lewy bodies" form inside nerve cells in the brain. Lewy bodies have been found in several brain disorders, including DLB and Parkinson's disease. Symptoms include:

- Memory problems, poor judgment, and confusion
- Movement changes (e.g., stiffness, shuffling walk, shakiness, lack of facial expression, problems with balance, falls)
- Excessive daytime drowsiness
- Visual hallucinations
- Changes in level of alertness throughout the day and week
- Acting out dreams

Frontotemporal Lobar Degeneration / Frontotemporal Dementia (FTD)

FTD is a rare disorder chiefly affecting the front and sides of the brain. It progresses more quickly than Alzheimer's disease and tends to occur at a younger age. The first symptoms often involve changes in personality, judgment, planning and social skills. People with FTD may begin to make rude or off-color remarks or make unwise decisions about finances or personal matters. They may show feelings disconnected from the situation, such as indifference or excessive excitement. They may have an unusually strong urge to eat and gain weight as a result.