Alzheimer’s Disease and Related Disorders – for the care partner

Confused about the difference between Alzheimer’s and dementia? You are in good company! To put it simply, dementia is a term used to describe the loss of memory and other mental abilities severe enough to interfere with daily life. Alzheimer’s disease is the most common form of dementia, accounting for 60-80% of all cases. Other disorders classified as dementia include: Vascular Dementia, Lewy Body Dementia, Frontotemporal Dementia and over 50 others. For more detailed information, read on.

What is dementia?

What is Alzheimer’s disease?

What is Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI)?

What are the other dementias?

What is dementia?

Dementia is a general term for loss of memory and other mental abilities severe enough to interfere with daily life. It is caused by physical changes in the brain. There are over 50 causes of dementia, of which Alzheimer’s disease is the most common. When someone has this condition, the following are some symptoms they may experience:

- Memory changes that disrupt daily life – forgetting recently learned information, important dates and events, or asking the same questions over and over
- New problems with speaking or writing
- Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
- Losing your train of thought easily
- Having a harder time concentrating
- Difficulty understanding what people are saying
- Finding it more difficult to complete familiar tasks and solve problems
- Finding it harder to become motivated and interested in daily activities
- Personality changes such as irritability, anxiety, or depression

Dementia affects people in different ways. It’s important to remember, however, that these symptoms will most likely happen gradually rather than all at once. If you notice these symptoms in someone, the next step is to talk with a doctor about them.
Dementia is not the same thing as normal aging. It may be hard to know the difference between age-related changes and the first signs of Alzheimer’s disease. Ask yourself: Is this something new? For example, if a person was never good at balancing a checkbook, struggling with this task is probably not a warning sign. But if their ability to balance a checkbook has changed a lot, it is something to share with a doctor. To learn more about distinguishing the two, click here (http://alz.org/alzheimers_disease_10_signs_of_alzheimers.asp)

What is Alzheimer’s disease?

Alzheimer’s disease is the most common cause of dementia. It is a progressive and fatal brain disease. As many as 5.3 million Americans are living with Alzheimer’s disease. Alzheimer's destroys brain cells, causing problems with memory, thinking and behavior severe enough to affect work, lifelong hobbies or social life. Alzheimer’s gets worse over time, and it is fatal. Today it is the seventh-leading cause of death in the United States.

Alzheimer's disease causes the formation of abnormal structures in the brain called plaques and tangles. As they accumulate in the brains of affected individuals, nerve cell connections are reduced. Areas of the brain that influence short-term memory tend to be affected first. Later, the disease works its way into sections of the brain that control other intellectual and physical functions.

Currently there is no cure for Alzheimer’s disease, but treatment for symptoms, combined with the right services and support, can make life better for the people living with Alzheimer’s. There is an accelerating worldwide effort underway to find better ways to treat the disease, delay its onset, or prevent it from developing.

What is Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI)?

MCI is a diagnosis that is used to describe people who have some problems with memory but do not actually have dementia. It is a subtle type of memory loss that is not part of the normal aging process. Someone with MCI is more forgetful than others in their age group. Typically, MCI does not significantly interfere with the ability to participate in daily activities. However, it can affect many areas of thought and actions such as attention, reasoning, reading, and writing.
People with MCI may also experience anxiety, depression, apathy, and irritability.

Some people with this diagnosis are at an increased risk for developing Alzheimer’s disease or another form of dementia. Currently, science is not able to predict who will progress, who will remain stable, and who will improve. However, a number of studies are underway to see whether certain treatments can prevent or delay dementia in people with MCI.

What are the other dementias?

Some of the other kinds of dementia you might have heard of are Vascular Dementia, Lewy-Body dementia, Frontotemporal Dementia, or Mad Cow Disease. If you’re concerned about a loved one’s memory loss, talk with a doctor about getting them properly evaluated. For more information about the many causes of dementia, click here (http://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_related_diseases.asp )

For more information on the subject of Alzheimer’s disease and related disorders, visit the National site here (http://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_alzheimers_disease.asp )

Additional resources used for this article include:

- New York City Chapter of the Alzheimer’s Association www.alz.org/nyc/
- Northern California and Northern Nevada Chapter of the Alzheimer’s Association www.alz.org/norcal/
- “What Happens Next?” a free booklet for early-stage individuals made available by the National Institute for Aging http://www.nia.nih.gov/Alzheimers/Publications/BrowserAndOrder.htm
- “By Us For Us” Guides http://marep.uwaterloo.ca/products/