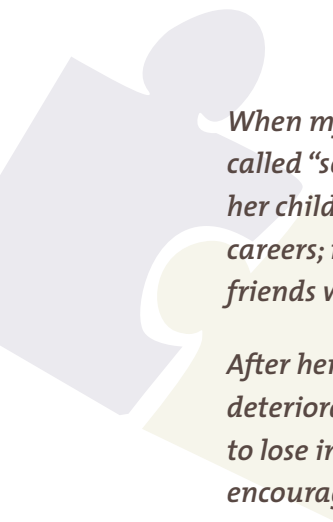




Dementia





*When my mother first started to show signs of what our family called “senile dementia” she was living alone in Melbourne. Both her children had moved away from Melbourne to pursue their careers; my sister overseas and I to Canberra, but she had good friends who visited frequently.*

*After her seventieth birthday there was a fairly rapid deterioration in her ability to organise herself and she seemed to lose interest in doing things. For a while she struggled on with encouragement from her daughters to keep as active as possible, but gradually she seemed to retire within herself. Her friends were marvellous, reaching out to keep her in their world, collecting her for functions, taking her to church, to meetings, to Anzac Day and other commemorations and giving her their love.*

*As her condition deteriorated, I became more concerned, but there was little I could do from Canberra. It was very frustrating and worrying.*

## *What is dementia?*

Dementia describes changes in the brain caused by a large group of illnesses that cause problems with memory, thinking and behaviour. These symptoms cause a progressive decline in a person’s ability to function. Dementia is a broad term to describe changes to memory, intellect, rationality, social skills and what would be considered normal emotional reactions.

Dementia can affect anybody, including those in their forties and fifties, but it is more common in people over the age of 65. Older people are more at risk of developing dementia, just as they are at more risk of developing such conditions as arthritis and heart disease. However dementia is not a natural part of ageing.

There are many different types of dementia and each has its own causes. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form representing between 50% and 70% of all cases. For detailed information about dementia, refer to Appendix 1: Different Forms and Causes of Dementia, on page 60.

## Younger onset dementia

*There had been ominous signs for quite some time. At first we just dismissed them as being caused by overwork, tiredness and stress. Never in our wildest dreams did we consider "dementia". He was, after all, only in his fifties.*

*Very soon after his diagnosis he lost his use of speech. He managed odd words but was never able to articulate a full thought. He was never able to share his fears, his wishes and his pain. Even so his courage always shone through with whatever insights he had. His wonderful warm deep chuckle comforting me and endearing him to all around.*

Although most dementias affect older people, sometimes younger people are diagnosed with the condition. Dementia has been diagnosed in the 30 to 60 year age groups.

The term "younger onset dementia" is usually used to describe people under the age of 65 with any form of dementia.

People with younger onset dementia and their families, have a number of extra challenges because the dementia appears when most people are enjoying a full and independent lifestyle. When diagnosed they are likely to be:

- in full-time employment
- actively raising a family
- financially responsible for the family, and
- physically strong and healthy.

## Younger veterans

DVA frequently uses the term “younger veterans”, primarily to distinguish between veterans of the Vietnam era and subsequent peacekeeping missions, from those of earlier conflicts. Many younger veterans are now in their early to late fifties, with some over 70 years of age.

The Vietnam Veteran’s Health Study (2000) examined a range of conditions including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in veterans. This study found that some health conditions were more common in veterans, suggesting a possible association with war service.

**However, there is no evidence of any link between war service and dementia among veterans.**

PTSD and depression were found to be higher in younger veterans. Some of the symptoms of severe depression such as confusion, poor memory, lack of ability to concentrate, decreased organisational capacity and disturbed sleep, are similar to those of dementia. Severe anxiety states can also mimic some aspects of dementia. However, with appropriate treatment these symptoms of depression and anxiety can be managed successfully.

## If you suspect dementia

A correct diagnosis by a doctor is essential if you suspect dementia. This may involve giving a detailed history, answering questions about memory and mood, a physical and neurological investigation, blood tests and often a scan of the brain. The doctor may refer you to a specialist such as a neurologist, psychiatrist or geriatrician, or to an Aged Care Assessment Team (ACAT).

There are a number of treatable conditions that produce symptoms similar to dementia. These conditions may also make symptoms of a true, underlying dementia worse. **It is essential to get a medical diagnosis when symptoms first appear to ensure that a treatable condition is diagnosed and treated correctly.** If the symptoms are caused by dementia, an early diagnosis will mean early access to support, information and medication, if appropriate.

## WHAT ARE THE EARLY SIGNS OF DEMENTIA?

The early signs of dementia can be very subtle and therefore not immediately obvious. Usually though, people seem to notice that there is a problem remembering recent events. Symptoms may include:

### CHANGES IN MEMORY

- Repeating the same questions and stories.
- Being absent-minded or forgetful.
- Losing valuables, keys, wallet.
- Getting lost in once familiar environments.

### CHANGES IN ORIENTATION

- Difficulty remembering the year, date, month, day.
- Difficulty remembering a home address and names of friends and family.

### CHANGES IN BEHAVIOUR

- Impaired judgement.
- Poor planning and organising ability.
- Deterioration in appearance and hygiene.
- Behaving in ways that are not normally the way the person would behave, such as swearing more or becoming more withdrawn.

### CHANGES IN EMOTIONS

- Easily aroused and mood changes.
- Unable to handle stress or noise, perhaps becoming agitated.
- Withdrawing socially.
- Losing drive and interest in things that used to provide joy and motivation.

### CHANGES IN THINKING

- Less flexible, more rigid.
- Difficulty mastering new tasks.
- Difficulty finding the right word, reduced language fluency.
- Difficulty starting new topics, thinking beyond the present.
- Mundane conversations, repeated phrases, words, ideas.

## Treatment for dementia

Dementia causes a number of behavioural and psychological symptoms that can often be treated without medication. There are many things that can be done to help ease these symptoms and provide comfort to the person with dementia, the families and carers.

Some people may respond to reassurance, a change in the environment or removal of something that is upsetting. Symptoms that may be treated using these methods include depression, anxiety, hallucinations and ideas of persecution, over-reaction to trivial events, agitation and disinhibited and aggressive behaviour.

It is important to pay attention to good general health, as this can improve the feeling of wellbeing.

Medication is currently available in Australia for use by people with dementia. These include drugs that may have a temporary effect in improving mental functioning and offer relief from some symptoms. A doctor or specialist will be able to provide relevant details on medication use.



## Dementia risk reduction: the importance of a healthy lifestyle



People often ask if dementia can be prevented. While this has not yet been confirmed, some risk and protective factors have been identified, some of which are within our control. Risk factors, such as ageing and genetics, are beyond our control, but we can do something about the risk factors related to lifestyle.

The health of your brain is linked to general health and wellbeing. Dementia shares many of the same risk factors as heart disease and stroke,

including elevated blood pressure and cholesterol, and obesity. A healthy lifestyle helps to keep your brain healthy and may reduce your risk of developing dementia.

It is important to remember that while the following tips for a healthy brain may offer a reduction in the risk of dementia, they do not guarantee prevention of dementia for any one person. Advances in research may also suggest different risk reduction strategies in the future. For up to date information, phone the National Dementia Helpline on 1800 100 500.

### **TIPS FOR A HEALTHY BRAIN**

- Eat a balanced diet low in saturated fat and high in protective foods such as fish, nuts, fruits and vegetables.
- Exercise regularly. \*
- Have regular health checks with your doctor.
- Keep your brain active with puzzles, crosswords, games and reading.
- Participate in leisure and social activities such as sports, hobbies and social groups.
- Avoid injury to your head.
- Avoid excessive alcohol consumption, recreational drug use and smoking.

\* It is important to consult a doctor before starting any exercise program, particularly if there are other illnesses or disabilities to consider.