

<http://www.psa.org.au/selfcare>

Dealing with dementia

Dementia is a condition that directly affects more than 250,000 Australians – a number which is expected to climb to nearly a million within 40 years.

As yet there is no cure for dementia; and indeed the way our brain and nervous system works is not yet fully understood. All the more remarkable then, that it was the German neurologist, Alois Alzheimer, born nearly 150 years ago who first identified and gave his name to a condition that has now become so common in the developed world.

Many people think dementia and Alzheimer's disease (AD) are one and the same. But Alzheimer's disease is just one particular form of dementia. Certainly, Alzheimer's disease is the most common form, accounting for between 50% and 70% of all cases. Vascular dementia, most often caused by a series of "mini strokes" is the next most common form.

However, dementia is not really a disease at all. It's a term used to describe the range of symptoms that occur when the brain is affected by certain conditions or illnesses. Memory loss is just one of those symptoms. More distressing as the dementia progressively worsens are the problems with language, confusion about time and place and the changes in mood, behaviour and personality.

There are other problems, too, that commonly affect people with dementia: incontinence, constipation, and dental problems. The Continence Foundation and the National Continence Helpline (1 800 330 066) can offer support. Exercise and an increase in dietary fibre intake are the first steps in prevention of constipation; and relieving dry mouth with artificial saliva or alcohol-free mouthwashes will often solve the problems related to the teeth and gums.

With no cure immediately in sight, not surprisingly, recent attention has turned to the issues of identifying risk factors and possible prevention strategies. Age, family history and genetic factors are considered to be definite risk factors; and some other probable risk factors include head injury, high blood pressure, uncontrolled diabetes and smoking. Sleep disorders, depression and low blood levels of vitamin B12 or folic acid are considered to be less likely causes.

Following an external search of various studies into dementia, a report on dementia prevention was commissioned by Alzheimer's Australia. Perhaps the most significant recommendation from the report is that we should keep "intellectually stimulated and engage in social/leisure activities". So, exercise for the brain, as well as the body, seems to be the prevention strategy most likely to be effective.

The so-called cholinesterase inhibitor medications are the mainstay of treatment (your pharmacist can give you more information); antipsychotics and antidepressants are of limited value. Other medicines, including herbal and complementary medicines, have been suggested for Alzheimer's disease but the evidence is not strong. However, being a non-smoker, just a light to moderate drinker, and eating a low fat diet could well be beneficial.

Nevertheless, there is still a lot we can do to manage dementia. It all revolves around care and understanding.

With early diagnosis and effective medicines, many people with dementia may retain their ability to communicate, particularly if they are given the time and space to respond.

For our part, we should avoid background noise, maintain eye contact and keep our expression friendly; remain calm and talk in a gentle matter of fact way.

For more advice, you can get dementia help sheets in 30 languages from Alzheimer's Australia (www.alzheimers.org.au). You'll find the most up-to-date information with regard to the risk factors, the symptoms and the management strategies

As well, the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia (PSA) has produced a fact card titled *Alzheimer's Disease and other forms of dementia*. It's available free of charge from all pharmacies around Australia providing the PSA Self Care health information. For the nearest location log onto the website www.psa.org.au and click on Self Care Pharmacy Finder.