

Dementia Factsheet

What is dementia?

Dementia is a broad term used to categorise a collection of symptoms. These symptoms are caused by chemical and structural changes in the brain. It is estimated by Alzheimer's Society that 850,000 people in the UK have dementia. It mainly affects people over the age of 65 (one in 14 people in this age group have dementia), and the likelihood of developing dementia increases significantly with age. However, dementia can affect younger people too. There are more than 42,000 people in the UK under 65 with dementia.

Dementia results in a progressive decline in multiple areas of function, this will often predominantly affect memory, but can also affect other areas such as orientation, speech, reasoning, and the skills needed to carry out daily activities. These changes can affect a person's behaviour; they may act in ways which seem completely out of character, for example becoming more angry and distressed. They may also experience psychological problems including depression and psychosis.

Dementia is a progressive condition, but with an early diagnosis and the right support people with a diagnosis of dementia can have a good quality life for many years.

The most common types of dementia are:

- Alzheimer's disease
- Vascular dementia
- A combination of Alzheimer's and Vascular dementia
- Lewy-Body dementia

There are many other types, however these are relatively rare.



What should I do if I am worried about dementia?

If you are worried about your memory or the memory of a loved one, the first step is to visit your GP. Your GP will ask some memory questions and check if there are physical problems that are contributing to the problem. They may then refer you to the Memory Clinic for further assessment and support.

Memory clinics are available in many locations across Devon. These are specialist clinics which someone with suspected dementia can attend to find out if they have it or not. The assessment process usually involves a specialist clinician who will take the details of your symptoms and concerns. They will also need some background information about you. A close friend or relative is invited to attend as well and provides information about any recent difficulties. A scan of the brain and some blood tests are usually done on the same day. Once all this information is gathered, it is usually possible to make a diagnosis of dementia on the same day. Occasionally, more information is needed and another follow up appointment might be necessary.

What treatment and support is available?

If a diagnosis of dementia is made, a wide range of information and support is available. This includes details about your diagnosis plus information on locally available support. For example Memory Groups, which will amongst other things, help to maintain and improve memory.

Most people with dementia are cared for in their own homes by family members or close friends. The role of the carer is very important, because they help the person with dementia to manage their symptoms and access additional support. Often the carer helps the person with dementia to remain living at home. Carers can find this role challenging and stressful, and it is important that they are themselves supported. There are Carers Education and Carers Support Groups, which can be accessed through local Memory Clinics.

Although there isn't a cure for dementia, there are medications and other interventions which can improve some of the symptoms and importantly, quality of life. Other interventions include psychological assessment, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and other complementary therapies. The risks and benefits of any medications are always discussed with the individual and their family.

Occasionally a person with dementia has very complex needs which can only be treated in hospital. In Devon there are specialist wards for people with dementia located in Exeter and Plymouth. These are staffed 24 hours a day by highly skilled professionals, with input from doctors, nurses, psychologists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists.

Useful Contacts

If you need further information on the available support and services near your area of residence, you can contact Devon Partnership NHS Trust free-phone on 0800 073 0741 (www.dpt.nhs.uk) or Livewell Southwest on 01752 435 363 (www.livewellsouthwest.co.uk/)

Other Useful Resources

- NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk or www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Dementia
- Alzheimer's Society helpline: 0300 222 1122 or www.alzheimers.org.uk
- AgeUK information line free-phone: 0800 678 1174 or www.ageuk.org.uk
- NHS Carers Direct, free confidential information and advice to help carers:
0300 123 1053

Information adapted from Cornwall Partnership NHS Foundation Trust's 'Dementia' leaflet.