

Australian version

iSupport For Dementia

Training and support manual
for carers of people with dementia



Unit 1. What is dementia

What is dementia and how does it affect someone?

Why is this learning unit important?

Dementia is a disease that can be overwhelming for the person and also for you as a caregiver. There are many myths about dementia and learning more will help explain some common misunderstandings.

How will this learning unit help me?

This learning unit will help you to understand the basics of dementia, what it is and how it affects someone. This information is essential when you are a carer. It will also guide you as to what help and resources are available to you.



What is dementia?

Dementia occurs as a result of a disease process in the brain and there are many causes, both known and unknown. Dementia affects a person's thinking, memory, behaviour and their ability to perform everyday tasks. It is present in all groups in society and is not linked to social class, gender, ethnic group or geographic location. Dementia can happen to anybody, but it is more common after the age of 65. Three in ten people over the age of 85 and almost one in ten people over 65 have dementia. There are lots of types of dementia and the most common will be discussed later in this module.

What causes dementia?

Dementia is caused by a number of diseases which produce gradual changes and damage in the brain. The diseases cause brain cells to degenerate and leads to a decline in a person's mental and sometimes physical abilities. Although there is no cure for dementia at present, if it is diagnosed in the early stages, there are ways it can be slowed to help maintain mental function.

Types of dementia?

Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's Disease is the most common form of dementia and accounts for 60-80% of dementia cases. The disease destroys brain cells and disrupts the transmitters which carry messages in the brain, particularly those responsible for storing memories, but eventually it affects all areas of the brain. Alzheimer's Disease was first described by Alois Alzheimer in Germany in 1906.

For more information about Alzheimer's Disease visit:

Brain Tour: https://www.alz.org/braintour/3_main_parts.asp

or:

Information sheet:

https://www.dementia.org.au/files/helpsheets/elpsheet-AboutDementia13-AlzheimersDisease_english.pdf





Vascular Dementia

Vascular dementia is a common type of dementia caused by reduced blood flow to the brain and as a result brain cells die. Vascular dementia can occur either suddenly following a stroke or over time through a series of small strokes. Vascular dementia accounts for 20%-30% of dementia cases. Vascular dementia tends to get worse over time, although it's sometimes possible to slow it down. The main symptoms of vascular dementia include slowness of thought, difficulty with planning and understanding, and problems with concentration. These problems can make daily activities increasingly difficult and someone with the condition may eventually be unable to look after themselves.



For more information about vascular dementia visit:

<https://www.dementia.org.au/about-dementia/types-of-dementia/vascular-dementia>

Dementia with Lewy Bodies

Dementia with Lewy Bodies is similar to Alzheimer's Disease in that it is caused by the degeneration and death of nerve cells in the brain. This type of dementia is characterised by visual hallucinations and fluctuating cognition (or having 'good days' and 'bad days'). Dementia with Lewy Bodies is named after the doctor who first wrote about them and is caused by a forming of abnormal deposits of protein in the nerve cells of the brain. It may account for around 10% of all cases of dementia.

It may be hard to distinguish Lewy Body disease from Parkinson's Disease, and some people with Parkinson's Disease develop a dementia which is similar to that seen in Lewy Body disease.

For more information about Dementia with Lewy Bodies visit:

<https://www.dementia.org.au/about-dementia/types-of-dementia/lewy-body-disease>



Frontotemporal dementia

Frontotemporal dementia (FTD) is the name given to dementia when it is due to progressive damage to the frontal and/or temporal lobes of the brain. These lobes are involved in mood, social behaviour, attention, judgement, planning and self-control. Damage can lead to reduced intellectual and language abilities and changes in personality, emotions and behaviour. In contrast to other dementias, memory often remains unaffected. It was first described 100 years ago by Arnold Pick and was previously referred to as Pick's Disease.

For more information about Frontotemporal dementia visit:

<https://www.dementia.org.au/about-dementia/types-of-dementia/frontotemporal>

Rarer causes of dementia

There are many other rarer causes of dementia, like alcohol-related dementia, Downs Syndrome and dementia due to HIV and AIDS.

What causes dementia?

The diseases that cause dementia are all similar in that the brain does not work like it did before. The exact causes of dementia are not clear. More research is needed to learn about the disease and the most effective ways to prevent, identify and treat it. To learn more about these diseases and problems with memory, thinking, behaviour or emotions, please visit:

<https://www.dementia.org.au/about-dementia/types-of-dementia>

Check your understanding



1. What happens to people with dementia?

People with dementia often forget things or have trouble with their memory. *Select the correct answer.*

- TRUE
- FALSE

ANSWERS - What is dementia?

Check your understanding



People with dementia often forget things or have trouble with their memory.

✓ True: This is the correct answer.



RELATED LEARNING UNITS

- Module 1 Unit 2 Timely diagnosis of dementia has many benefits
- Module 1 Unit 3 Using memory aids in your care activities
- Module 1 Unit 4 How to respond to repetitive behaviour
- Module 2 Unit 1 The journey together
- Module 3 Unit 3 Thinking differently
- Module 4 Unit 5 An enjoyable day
- Module 5 Unit 1 Introduction to person-centred care approach
- Module 6 Unit 1 Introduction to consumer-directed care

Keep in Mind



- Dementia affects a person's brain.
- Dementia is common, especially in older people.
- Dementia is a disease, not a part of normal ageing.



For additional care and support, see
Dementia Australia in your state,
<https://www.dementia.org.au/> or call
National Dementia Helpline on 1800 100 500.

Tip



You finished this unit, well done!