



How to spot signs of Dementia... and what to do if you do



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There are 850,000 people living with Dementia in the UK today. By 2025 the number is expected to rise to over one million. Dementia is the leading cause of death for women in the UK and yet, surprisingly, lots of people know very little about it. Our regional care team give the following advice:

What is Dementia?

Dementia is not a disease in itself. Dementia is a word used to describe a collection of symptoms that occur when brain cells stop functioning properly. The most common cause of Dementia is Alzheimer's disease but there are others. Symptoms include memory loss, confusion, mood changes and difficulty with day-to-day tasks.

Are there any common signs?

One of the greatest problems in recognising the various forms of Dementia is that it affects people in different ways. However, some of the most common signs to watch out for are:

♥ **Memory loss** - declining memory is probably the most readily recognised symptom. This is more than just forgetfulness. A person may not only forget someone's name but not recognise that person as their neighbour or relative.

♥ **Increase in dependency** - a classic example being an increase in the number of phone calls. It can appear quite normal at first but often escalates to the point where some family members stop answering the phone. Unfortunately the caller's anxiety continues and they simply call again.

♥ **Confusion as to time and place** - we all forget the day of the week or lose track of time momentarily but for people with Dementia, this takes on another dimension. They will often forget the day of the week, forget where they live, or want to return to a home they lived in many years ago.

♥ **Mood swings or unusual behaviour** - a person with Dementia may exhibit a change in their demeanour, becoming unusually emotional, perhaps irritable or experience rapid mood swings. Others will often start crying for no apparent reason which can be understandably distressing.

♥ **Misplacing things** - anyone can temporarily misplace their wallet or keys but a person with Dementia may put things in unusual places, with neither reason nor logic. In the early stages, they will realise that they have misplaced something and become frustrated when they cannot find it in the place they expect it to be.

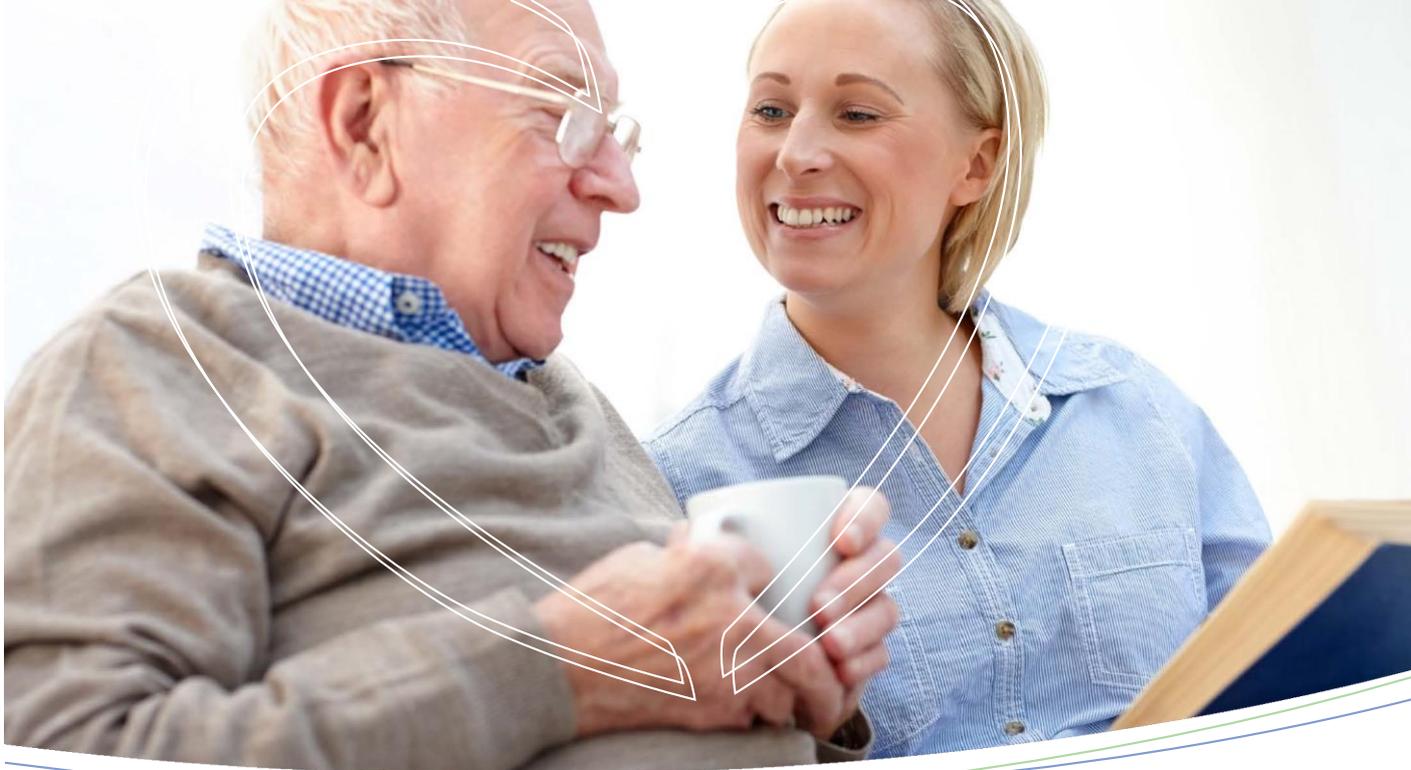
♥ **The Jekyll and Hyde factor** - someone living with Dementia may seem to take on a completely different personality. They may become rude, objectionable, cantankerous, anxious, depressed, irritable and suspicious to the point that you may not be sure that you ever knew them.

♥ **The familiar becomes an ordeal** - People living with Dementia often find that simple tasks like getting dressed and putting clothes on in the right order, or the appropriate clothes for the current weather conditions, just don't make sense. Watch out for things like unopened post, unpaid bills, strange changes in diet etc.

♥ **Lack of drive** - no matter how out of character it may seem, Dementia sufferers may appear to be lethargic, content to watch TV for hours, sleeping more than usual and losing interest in their hobbies.

Is there a 'most at risk' age group?

Generally, the more elderly the person, the higher the risk. People in their 80's and 90's make up a large percentage of cases but don't assume that means younger mums, dads or grandparents are just having off days. Some people may start showing the first signs much sooner. Early onset Dementia affects over 40,000 people under the age of 65 in the UK.



Who should I tell / what should I do if I'm worried?

If you think that any of these problems are affecting your daily life, or the life of someone you know, the best thing to do is to address it as soon as possible. Sweeping it under the carpet or thinking that you'll 'wait and see' if things happen again or get worse can have devastating effects. As with most illnesses, the quicker we get medical intervention, the better.

In the first instance, if possible, discuss your concerns with family and friends and let them know you are worried. They may have noticed things too. Having the support of family and friends is important for everyone.

Secondly, a delicate, caring and sympathetic chat to your loved one needs to happen. They may be just as scared and confused as you and it's important that you remember this is happening to them and they need to be involved if possible.

Finally, you should encourage your loved one to speak to a doctor. Reassure them that you will go with them, even make the appointment for them if they would prefer. Try to remember this is going to be scary and upsetting for someone so your patience and understanding is crucial BUT acting swiftly can have a dramatic impact on quality of life.

How to talk to your loved one about it

Unless symptoms are so severe that your loved one won't be able to understand what is happening, you need to calmly and sensitively talk to them about things. At this point, constant reassurance is crucial. It's likely to be a distressing and maybe even frightening conversation for someone so try to keep things as relaxed as possible, during the day not the evening and at a time when they won't immediately be left on their own afterwards to work themselves into a panic.

Try asking questions like 'it's getting a bit harder now to make lunch isn't it? And 'are you missing being able to get out and about as much as you used to?' to stimulate a conversation. Never talk 'about' your loved one and their problems in front of them as though they aren't there. Avoid confrontational words and phrases like 'You're always forgetting things it's a nightmare', 'I'm worried you're going to get hurt/lost' 'it's dangerous', 'it makes you look stupid' etc. All of this will lead to a very negative reaction and cause feelings of guilt and possibly denial.

Who can help me with care?

There are three main options for care and support with Dementia:

♥ **Family and friends** - You provide the care, support and companionship for your loved one via your family and friends. This is not a decision to take lightly. Being a carer can be a very demanding, tiring and emotional role, especially when you are close to the person.

♥ **Local government / council services** - A doctor or social worker will arrange an introduction to a council funded care provider.

♥ **Private care providers & Live-in care** - Private care companies can offer different levels of support to suit the individual. Domiciliary providers offer short visits which may be suitable for the early stages to provide a



little support and peace of mind but as things progress and mobility, memory and well-being declines, you might choose to look at options like live-in care to provide 24 hour assistance. A live-in carer lives with you or a loved one in their home to ensure as much independence and normality is retained as possible.

All of the options above have one very important thing in common - keeping your loved one in the comfort and familiarity of their own homes. Studies have shown that caring for Dementia patients at home significantly improves quality of life. Familiar surroundings, personal possessions and a feeling of normality have a positive impact on health and wellbeing.

All too often, Dementia and the onset of Dementia goes unrecognised because we simply attribute symptoms to 'old age'. By being aware of what to look out for in our family and friends, we can help increase their chances of diagnosis and most importantly, help them have a better standard of life in later years. Dementia is nothing to be ashamed of and it's possible to live an independent and active life with the right support. Above all, if you think someone you know is affected, don't despair - there is help available for everyone so please, seek it.

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