



## Dementia fact sheet

### What is dementia?

Dementia is an umbrella term used to describe the symptoms of a large group of illnesses which cause a progressive decline in a person's functioning. It is a broad term that describes a loss of memory, social skills, intellect and usual emotional reactions. The person may look healthy physically but on the inside their brain is not working properly. There are a number of different forms of dementia, the most common being Alzheimer's disease, which accounts for 50-70% of all cases. Alzheimer's is a progressive, degenerative condition that affects the brain.

### Memory Loss

Not everyone experiences memory loss but it is one of the main symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. The difference in dementia is that the memory loss is persistent and progressively worsens. It may affect a person's ability to continue to work, carry out familiar tasks, find their way home and may eventually mean being unable to recognise friends and family. A person with dementia may lose the car keys and then forget what they are used for.

### Who gets dementia?

Dementia can happen to anyone but increases in incidence with age. For people 70-75 years of age, approximately 1 person in 30 has dementia. For people aged 90-95, it is 1 person in 3. It can affect people in their 30's, 40's and 50's. About a third of people with Alzheimer's have a close relative who has or had dementia, but in most cases there is no family history.

### How does dementia affect people?

Initially there may be only slight changes in personality or behaviour. They may become less motivated to do the things that previously they enjoyed or may feel insecure when separated from familiar surroundings or routines.

The person with dementia may have word finding difficulty or may be repetitive in speech. With progression of dementia, changes become more noticeable by others, affecting their concentration, understanding and their ability to reason. People with dementia may experience confusion, disorientation, mood swings and aggression as they struggle with the frustrations of everyday life.



## **The importance of family and friends**

Family and friends play a vital role in the lives of people living with dementia. They provide links to the past and enable a person with dementia to continue to be loved and a valued member of a family and society.

Family and friends can also provide support for the carer of someone living with dementia. Many studies confirm high rates of stress, anxiety and physical illness in families where someone has dementia. Unfortunately, many people stay away from families after dementia has been diagnosed because they don't know what to say or are frightened by dementia. They are often afraid of saying the "wrong thing" and making the person feel worse.

## **How can you help?**

Family and friends can help support people affected by dementia in many ways.

- Learn about dementia – so that you can understand that it is a progressive illness that affects the functioning of the brain and this is what results in the person with dementia displaying irrational actions and behaviours.
- Encourage the family and carers to have breaks.
- Make yourself available for a chat from time to time.
- Offer help in the form of a meal, shopping or an errand.
- Support the person living with dementia to keep up their interests prior to their diagnosis.
- Remember to avoid crowds or noisy environments as these often cause anxiety.
- People with dementia can still enjoy themselves, this doesn't involve memory. Even if an outing is soon forgotten, the feelings that enjoyment elicits still make it worthwhile.
- Ask about specific ways that you can help because people are often reluctant to admit they need assistance until a crisis occurs.

Remember that people living with dementia retain their feelings and emotions even though they may not understand what is being said so it is important to always maintain their dignity and self-esteem. Talk in a gentle manner, allow time for responses and make sure your body language reinforces what you are saying e.g. wave when saying goodbye.

**The best way to help someone living with dementia is to stay in touch and let them know they are loved.**

If you wish to find out more about dementia or services available please don't hesitate to contact the Southern Cross Care (WA) Inc Dementia Centre of Excellence team on 1300 669 189.

The National Dementia Helpline number is 1800 100 500

# **Dementia Centre of Excellence**