Dementia – or just ‘old-age’?

When does simple forgetfulness become something more?
If you or a loved one are experiencing any of the following signs, it’s worth getting it checked out by a doctor.

- Repeatedly forgetting things
- Forgetting recent events even if you remember things that happened in the past
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty with everyday tasks
- Changes to behaviour
What's the difference between dementia and simple forgetfulness?

For many of us, simple forgetfulness can easily be explained by our busy lives. If you’re fighting a deadline at work, it’s easy to forget that dentist appointment you booked months ago. And if you bump into an old colleague, it can be a struggle to remember their name. But the memory loss you get with dementia has a subtle difference.

If you have dementia, you might repeatedly forget appointments or names, and it may for the large part just affect your memory of recent events. You might not be able to remember a conversation you had earlier that very same day, for example. But in the early and middle stages of dementia your long-term memory isn’t affected in the same way. And while your forgetfulness may be mild at first, it’s likely to get worse over time. It’s in these early stages of dementia that you – or more likely your friends or family – might begin to notice that something is wrong.

What is dementia?

Dementia is a term that’s used to describe a set of symptoms, including memory loss, that can develop as a result of damage to your brain. It affects the way your brain functions and as a result, you can start to struggle with everyday life. There are lots of different types of dementia, such as Alzheimer’s disease and vascular dementia, and the specific symptoms can vary a bit between them.

The risk of getting dementia increases with age but you can also get it when you’re younger (under 65), which is called early-onset dementia.

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There are currently 850,000 people living with dementia in the UK and this is estimated to rise to over a million by 2025.

We all suffer from the odd moment of forgetfulness, but if it's happening to you regularly or it seems to be getting worse, it's worth getting it checked out with your GP. Even if it is dementia, there are various therapies available that can help to improve your symptoms.”

Professor Graham Stokes, Global Director of Dementia Care, Bupa

Other ways dementia can affect you

There are other ways that dementia can affect you too, and which can help you to distinguish it from mere forgetfulness. You may have difficulty concentrating and finding the right words. Dementia can also make it difficult to do everyday tasks.

You might struggle with making meals, or find it difficult to remember to wash every day and dress appropriately. For example you may put on odd socks or fail to tuck your shirt into your trousers. Some things you might once have found easy, such as managing your personal finances, may become harder.

These things can all provide vital clues to your friends and family that you might need some help and support. They might also notice that you're not doing any housework or calling them anymore, or that you're having difficulties with things like shopping.

Dementia can also affect your behaviour. You might become depressed or anxious, and later on you might show completely different personality traits. For example, you might become what you'd have previously considered to be over-friendly or even flirtatious with others. On the flip side, you might become suspicious or scared of other people, and even be aggressive towards them.

When should I visit my GP?

If you're worried about forgetting things and it's happening to you regularly, it's a good idea to go and see your GP, particularly if you find it's affecting your everyday activities and how you're functioning in life. They can help you to determine if it's forgetfulness or possible dementia.

Medical and mental health conditions, like depression or a deficiency in vitamin B12, can also make us forgetful. These conditions are treatable and reversible so they're important to rule out.

What happens next?

Although there isn't a cure for dementia, your GP will suggest various things you can do to minimise your symptoms or help you manage them. You may be able to try a drug called an acetylcholinesterase inhibitor (eg donepezil), which can help to relieve your memory problems for a while.

Your GP may also suggest counselling to help you deal with your diagnosis. Other treatments, such as cognitive stimulation therapy, can help to improve your memory and communication. Your GP will help you to find out what's available in your area.
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