

Dementia and Alzheimer's: What Are the Differences?



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Dementia vs. Alzheimer's

[Dementia](#) and [Alzheimer's disease](#) aren't the same. Dementia is an overall term used to describe symptoms that impact [memory](#), performance of daily activities, and [communication abilities](#). Alzheimer's disease is the most common type of dementia. Alzheimer's disease gets worse with time and affects memory, language, and thought.

While younger people can develop dementia or Alzheimer's disease, your [risk](#) increases as you age. Still, neither is considered a normal part of aging.

Although symptoms of the two conditions may overlap, distinguishing them is important for management and treatment.

Dementia is a syndrome, not a disease. A syndrome is a group of symptoms that doesn't have a definitive diagnosis. Dementia is a [group of symptoms](#) that affects mental cognitive tasks such as memory and reasoning. Dementia is an umbrella term that Alzheimer's disease can fall under. It can occur due to a variety of conditions, the most common of which is Alzheimer's disease.

People can have more than one type of dementia. This is known as mixed dementia. Often, people with mixed dementia have multiple conditions that may contribute to dementia. A diagnosis of mixed dementia can only be confirmed in an autopsy.

As dementia progresses, it can have a huge impact on the ability to function independently. It's a major cause of disability for older adults, and places an emotional and financial burden on families and caregivers.

The [World Health Organization](#) says that 47.5 million people around the world are living with dementia.

Symptoms of dementia

It's easy to overlook the [early symptoms of dementia](#), which can be mild. It often begins with simple episodes of [forgetfulness](#). People with dementia have trouble keeping track of time and tend to lose their way in familiar settings.

As dementia progresses, forgetfulness and [confusion](#) grow. It becomes harder to recall names and faces. Personal care becomes a problem. Obvious signs of dementia include repetitious questioning, inadequate hygiene, and poor decision-making.

In the most advanced stage, people with dementia become unable to care for themselves. They will struggle even more with keeping track of time, and remembering people and places they are familiar with. Behavior continues to change and can turn into [depression](#) and [aggression](#).

You're more likely to develop dementia as you age. It occurs when certain [brain cells](#) are damaged. Many conditions can [cause dementia](#), including [degenerative diseases](#) such as Alzheimer's, [Parkinson's](#), and [Huntington's](#). Each cause of dementia causes damage to a different set of brain cells.

Alzheimer's disease is responsible for about [50 to 70 percent](#) of all cases of dementia.

Other causes of dementia include:

- infections, such as [HIV](#)
- [vascular diseases](#)
- [stroke](#)
- [depression](#)
- chronic [drug](#) use

Alzheimer's disease

Dementia is the term applied to a group of symptoms that negatively impact memory, but Alzheimer's is a [progressive](#) disease of the brain that slowly causes impairment in memory and cognitive function. The exact cause is unknown and no cure is available.

The [National Institutes of Health](#) estimate that more than 5 million people in the United States have Alzheimer's disease. Although younger people can and do get Alzheimer's, the symptoms generally begin after age 60.

The time from diagnosis to death can be as little as three years in people over 80 years old. However, it can be much longer for younger people.

The effects of Alzheimer's on the brain

It's impossible to diagnose Alzheimer's with complete accuracy while a person is alive. The diagnosis can only be confirmed when the brain is examined under a microscope during an autopsy. However, specialists are able to make the correct diagnosis up to [90 percent](#) of the time.

Alzheimer's vs. dementia symptoms

The symptoms of Alzheimer's and dementia can overlap, but there can be some differences.

Both conditions can cause:

- a decline in the ability to think
- [memory impairment](#)
- communication impairment

The symptoms of Alzheimer's include:

- difficulty remembering recent events or conversations
- [apathy](#)
- [depression](#)
- confusion
- behavioral changes

- [difficulty speaking](#), swallowing, or walking in advanced stages of the disease

Some types of dementia will share some of these symptoms, but they include or exclude other symptoms that can help make a differential diagnosis. [Lewy body dementia \(LBD\)](#), for example, has many of the same later symptoms as Alzheimer's. However, people with LBD but are more likely to experience initial symptoms such as visual [hallucinations](#), difficulties with [balance](#), and sleep disturbances.

People with dementia due to Parkinson's or Huntington's disease are more likely to experience [involuntary movement](#) in the early stages of the disease.

Treating dementia vs. treating Alzheimer's

[Treatment for dementia](#) will depend on the exact cause and type of dementia, but many treatments for dementia and Alzheimer's will overlap.

Alzheimer's treatment

No cure for Alzheimer's is available, but options to help manage symptoms of the disease include:

- medications for behavioral changes, such as antipsychotics
- medications for memory loss, which include cholinesterase inhibitors donepezil (Aricept) and rivastigmine (Exelon) and memantine (Namenda)
- [alternative remedies](#) that aim to boost brain function or overall health, such as [coconut oil](#) or [fish oil](#)
- medications for [sleep](#) changes
- medications for [depression](#)

- drugs
- tumors
- [metabolic disorders](#)
- [hypoglycemia](#)

In most cases, dementia isn't reversible. However, many forms are treatable. The right medication can help manage dementia. Treatments for dementia will depend on the cause.

For example, doctors often treat dementia caused by Parkinson's disease and LBD with cholinesterase inhibitors that they also often use to treat Alzheimer's.

Treatment for vascular dementia will focus on preventing further damage to the brain's blood vessels and preventing [stroke](#).

People with dementia can also benefit from supportive services from home health aides and other caregivers. An assisted living facility or nursing home may be necessary as the disease progresses.

Outlook for people with dementia vs. people with Alzheimer's

The outlook for people with dementia depends entirely on the direct cause of the dementia. Treatments are available to make symptoms of dementia due to Parkinson's manageable, but there isn't currently a way to stop or even slow down the related dementia. Vascular dementia can be slowed down in some cases, but it still shortens a person's lifespan. Some types of dementia are reversible, but most types are irreversible and will instead cause more impairment over time.

[Alzheimer's](#) is a terminal illness, and no cure is currently available. The length of time each of the three stages lasts varies. The average person diagnosed with Alzheimer's has an estimated lifespan of approximately four to eight years after diagnosis, but some people can live with Alzheimer's for up to 20 years.

Talk to your doctor if you're concerned that you have the symptoms of [dementia](#) or [Alzheimer's](#) disease. Starting treatment promptly can help you manage your symptoms.