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More than three million cases of dementia are diagnosed in the United States every year. Sadly, there is still no cure in sight. However, many treatments can improve a person with dementia's quality of life, such as medication and therapy, which help slow the progression of the disease. Although it is often used synonymously with Alzheimer's disease, dementia has a unique set of symptoms. Many patients with dementia may experience problems with all types of memory loss. The most common symptom is short-term memory loss. Someone with this type of memory impairment may have difficulty recalling something that took place hours or even minutes ago. However, they may remember something that happened twenty years ago. Some patients and their loved ones attribute this symptom to stress or having a lot on their minds. However, this is one of the most prominent early warning signs of dementia. Another early warning sign is the way that dementia can affect how a person speaks. Many people with dementia have difficulty finding the right words, which can cause them to become quieter than they were. Often, they cease to communicate with friends and family. Another early warning symptom that may indicate dementia is confusion. This can range from a bit of cloudiness to a constant state of mental disarray. A commonly reported manifestation of confusion is the inability to match a face with a name. Confusion may also cause a person to use poor judgment. In some cases, a person with dementia may cease to interact with people, withdrawing from activities they once enjoyed. A person with dementia may experience mood swings or shifts. This symptom is often dependent upon the other symptoms they happen to be experiencing that particular day. For example, when a patient has a hard time remembering where they left their car keys, it can create a pattern for the entire day, often ending in depression and anxiety. People with dementia typically do not realize that their moods are changing from one minute to the next. They may even become combative when confronted about these shifts. Patients with dementia often have a difficult time understanding sarcasm. As brain functions become muddled, the patient may become incapable of distinguishing between sarcasm and seriousness and will begin to take everything literally, misunderstanding common expressions and figures of speech. Completing normal daily activities and chores can become complicated for a person with dementia. The disease can completely alter the way the mind processes vital information. This means that a person with dementia may forget how to tie their shoes. Some may attempt to teach themselves a more complicated way to complete a basic task that they've been doing since childhood. This symptom can affect their ability to learn new things, as well. An inability to perform simple tasks makes working outside of the home difficult. At this stage, patients with dementia generally require live-in assistance. Patients with dementia may begin to develop problems with repetition that can range in severity. An individual may forget if they went to the grocery store or washed their car and, as a result, repeat these tasks. This may eventually progress into completing tasks over and over again. They may even begin untying their shoes and then retying them several times within the same hour. This early warning sign can often be confusing, causing friends and family members to associate it with obsessive-compulsive disorder. People with dementia typically experience a loss of interest in life. This is why it is so important they receive counseling or work with a mental health care provider to help prevent or delay the onset of depression and anxiety. Combined with the other symptoms of dementia, these feelings can be extremely dangerous. Friends and family members should continue to involve their loved one in activities and help them maintain their regular schedule where possible. Another early warning sign of dementia is increased instances of falling. People may find it difficult to tell their feet where to go. They may misjudge their steps and fall down on stairs or sidewalks. They may also begin to lose their sense of direction. Many even forget where they live. For this reason, it is important that a person with dementia be closely cared for by friends, family, or in-home health care professionals. People who have dementia have a difficult time coping with the changes occurring in their lives. They often feel as if someone has completely taken over their minds and that they are rarely in control of any scenario or circumstance. This can create a lot of fear, and can be one more incentive for an individual to start withdrawing from society. He or she may also begin to crave a strict routine, hoping to avoid as many surprise situations as possible. If you are concerned that you may have dementia, it's important to speak with a healthcare provider and start the diagnostic process as soon as possible. Though there is no single "dementia test," healthcare providers can use your medical history and a combination of tests to evaluate your symptoms and determine the cause. This article walks you through what it takes to diagnose dementia and out other possible causes for dementia-like symptoms. It also discusses how to cope with a diagnosis. If you're worried about possible signs of dementia, you may want to keep a record of how often you notice these memory and thinking problems. You can even ask a family member or close friend how often they've noticed them. There is also a cognitive assessment called the Self-Administered Gerocognitive Exam (SAGE) that is available online for people to use in the comfort of their own homes. You can take the test at home and see how you do, but be aware that the results should be brought to a healthcare provider for review. Usually, you will want to start with your primary care provider (PCP). Some PCPs will handle this evaluation completely themselves, while others will refer you to a specialist in memory and cognition. There is no single test that can determine if someone has dementia. Instead, healthcare providers use a collection of tests, scans, and assessments to determine what is causing your symptoms. The tests that your healthcare provider orders will depend on what other symptoms you're having, in addition to the changes in your cognitive abilities. Testing aims to learn more about what is causing your problems. You should share with your practitioner any symptoms you're having, in addition to your memory and thought process difficulties. This includes things like changes in balance or walking, coordination, activity level, and overall health. Note how long you've had the symptoms and the impact they're having on your life. Also give your provider a complete list of the medications that you're taking. This includes any over-the-counter supplements or natural products you're taking, since they may interact with your prescriptions or with each other. Cognitive tests are used to evaluate thinking abilities such as memory, concentration, problem-solving, and language skills. Many tests have been developed to evaluate a person's mental ability, most of which take 15 to 30 minutes to complete. Some of the most commonly used cognitive tests include: Your healthcare provider may order blood tests to rule out other causes of your symptoms. Some of the most common blood tests investigate: InfectionElectrolyte levels Kidney functionLiver functionThyroid functionVitamin B12 deficiency A healthcare provider may also use brain scans to rule out other conditions that can cause dementia-like symptoms, such as brain tumors and stroke. For example, scans can help determine whether a person has vascular dementia (due to reduced blood flow to the brain) or Alzheimer's. Computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) are the most common type of brain scans used to check for these problems in the brain. Sometimes, the diagnosis from the healthcare provider is labeled as a specific type of dementia, such as Alzheimer's, Lewy body dementia, vascular dementia, or frontotemporal dementia. This can help direct effective treatment and help you develop appropriate expectations for how the dementia may progress over time. Sometimes a healthcare provider will simply diagnose you as having "dementia." This is because it can be difficult to determine which type is actually causing the symptoms. There are several kinds of dementia, and further testing may help clarify your specific type. In some cases, dementia symptoms may also be caused by more than one medical condition, such as the case of mixed dementia. Mixed dementia is diagnosed when it's suspected or known that two or more diseases are causing dementia, such as a combination of Alzheimer's and vascular dementia. Some people feel like they'd rather not know if they have dementia if there's no cure available at this time. However, there are several benefits of an early diagnosis. Even though receiving a dementia diagnosis is difficult, it can also help explain why you've been having a harder time with your memory or decisions. Some people report feeling relief in knowing the cause of these symptoms. There's also a benefit to knowing about your dementia so you can take the opportunity to make decisions for your future and communicate them to those around you. One of the common reactions to a difficult situation is denial. It's not unusual to say, "I don't think this is correct. It's got to be something else." While this questioning may be a part of the grieving process of this diagnosis, it could also have its merits. It's not always a bad idea to get a second opinion. Memory problems, confusion, and sluggishness aren't always a sign of dementia. Treatable conditions like dehydration, vitamin deficiency, and depression also have similar symptoms. It's possible that your dementia-like symptoms could be from a reversible condition that, once treated appropriately, could improve. You have nothing to lose by getting a second opinion. If a second opinion provides you with some peace of mind, it may be well worth it, even if it doesn't change the diagnosis. If you are concerned that you're experiencing dementia, keep a record of your symptoms and discuss them with your healthcare provider. There are screening tests you can take online before your visit. A dementia diagnosis will be based on your history and symptoms, thinking and memory testing, and perhaps blood tests or brain scans to get more information. Trying to figure out the cause of your symptoms can seem daunting. But getting an early and accurate diagnosis is the first step toward getting the help and support you need to manage your symptoms.

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