
Dementia

Dementia is a term that describes a gradual, progressive loss of mental functions that may include thinking, memory, reasoning, and judgment. It also affects personality and the ability to interact with others. Dementia is not a specific disease; rather it describes a group of symptoms, caused by different disorders that affect the brain. Common causes of dementia are: Alzheimer's disease, alcoholism, and vascular disease (dementia caused by high blood pressure and stroke).

Signs and symptoms of dementia

- Forgetfulness
- Difficulties with familiar activities (For example: The person may put things in the wrong places like putting the iron in the refrigerator or, have great difficulty remembering where he/she puts something.)
- Language problems and inability to remember simple words (For example: The person may use the wrong word to fill in for what he/she does not remember. This makes it difficult to understand what the person is trying to say.)
- Loss of direction (For example: The person can go out and then not know how to get back home.)
- Impaired judgment (For example: The person could wear a bathrobe to go shopping or wear a winter coat in the middle of summer.)
- Impaired ability to recognize symbols (For example: The person can't recognize numbers or do simple math.)
- Sudden mood swings without a known cause
- Personality changes, which may occur suddenly or over a period of time (For example: Someone who is usually kind becomes unexpectedly angry or temperamental.)
- Loss of interest in hobbies, no interest in new activities

What you can do

- Treat the person with respect. Remember the person is an adult. Do not 'talk down' to him/her like a child
- Do not talk about the person as if he/she is not in the room
- Do not use words like "honey," "sweetie," etc.
- If the person asks, remind him/her of the day, place and time, but do not feel the need to continually reorient him/her as it may increase agitation
- Try to understand the person's emotions and feelings. Persons with dementia often react to situations in a more emotional way
- Encourage daily routine with small rituals that are important. These can include prayers, washing hands, or preparing food
- Provide an explanation before doing a task
- Allow the person to do as much of his/her own care as he/she can. This will help maintain the person's self esteem

- Include former habits and memories. Things most recently learned are easily forgotten. Provide him/her with things to hold that represent part of his/her life: pictures, piece of a child's clothing, football, etc. Music and gentle humming may be reminders of a familiar life
- Talk in a calm and reassuring manner
- The person may display unusual behavior. Try not to react negatively because this could upset the person and worsen the behavior
- Resist the impulse to control the behavior. All behavior may have meaning, even though it may not make sense to observers. If the person is showing signs of stress, redirecting him/her to a new activity may be helpful
- Watch for situations that could result in aggressive behaviors. Persons with dementia can become violent and may throw things or try to hit. Be aware of personal safety

How you can support the family

- Remember that caring for someone with dementia can be very demanding
- Encourage the family/caregiver to take care of themselves
- Report behaviors to the nurse that are aggressive, dangerous, or very bothersome

Other HPNA Teaching Sheets on are available at www.HPNA.org.

Reference

Core Curriculum for the Generalist Hospice and Palliative Nurse. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company; 2010.

Approved by the HPNA Education Committee June 2005. Reviewed June 2008.
Reviewed/revise June 2012