Whether it is the topic of a local broadcast or an article in our favorite publication, we often hear of how dementia is affecting our society. But younger generations in particular may not know what dementia is and simply think, “it is something that happens when you get old.” This is not the case. Dementia becomes evident in a person when their brain has been affected by a disease such as Alzheimer’s. This article will provide a thorough understanding of what dementia entails including its symptoms, causes, and even ways of lowering potential risk.

What is Dementia?

Dementia refers to a common set of symptoms that are caused due to the brain damage caused by a disease. Dementia commonly
includes cognitive impairments such as memory loss, difficulty with problem solving and impeded communication. These symptoms may begin more subtly but will progress to the point where their severity impacts a person’s daily life. It is also common for an individual suffering from dementia to experience noticeable changes in their mood and/or behavior. Because dementia can be caused by different diseases, the initial symptoms that present themselves within a patient are dependent upon which parts of the brain have been exposed/affected.

**Symptoms of Dementia**

Dementia manifests itself differently in each individual. Individuals with dementia will face cognitive problems (problems with thinking and/or memory) in addition to emotional problems. It is important to remember that dementia is progressive and that symptoms will increase in severity over time. Similar to the presentation of actual symptoms, the overall rate of progression of dementia will also vary based upon the individual.

**Cognitive Symptoms of Dementia**

Cognitive issues present significant challenges for dementia patients. Some of these issues are outlined below:

- **Short-term memory loss** – This can be thought of as “day-to-day” memory and refers to when an individual with dementia has difficulty remembering occurrences that happened recently.
- **Difficulty with concentrating/decision making** – Individuals afflicted with dementia may have difficulty with tasks that involve concentrating, planning, organizing, making decisions, solving problems or executing tasks that require a sequence of events.
- **Verbal communication** – The ability to effectively
communicate verbally is another issue faced by patients with dementia. The ability to explicitly communicate can vary greatly and depends on how advanced the dementia has become.

- **Visuospatial difficulties** – Dementia patients may have difficulties when attempting to assess distances or seeing objects three dimensionally.

- **Struggling with orientation** – Oftentimes, individuals afflicted with dementia may lose track of the day, what the actual date is or become confused about where they are located. The degree of confusion can also vary greatly by patient.

- **Visual Hallucinations and delusions** – Some forms of dementia will cause individuals to see things that are not true (visual hallucinations) or believe things that are not true (delusions).

**Emotional Symptoms of Dementia**

In addition to struggling with cognitive symptoms, many dementia patients will experience a change in their overall mood or outlook. The internal confusion caused by dementia may result in an individual becoming more irritable or frustrated, more withdrawn, and may also have dramatic shifts in their level of anxiety or sadness. Changes in behavior may become more noticeable as the disease continues to progress. Some common behavioral changes may include more constant and repetitive questioning, frequent pacing, and an overall feeling of restlessness or agitation. Emotional and behavioral changes coupled with cognitive impairments will present challenges for their primary caretaker.

**What Causes Dementia?**

Dementia is caused by diseases that affect the brain. Although Alzheimer’s disease is the most well-known, there are other
diseases that will cause the symptoms of dementia. An outline of some of these diseases are provided below:

**Alzheimer’s Disease**

Alzheimer’s disease is the most common cause of dementia in the U.S. Alzheimer’s causes the body’s brain cells to be surrounded by abnormal proteins and will also damage the internal structure of these cells. As the disease continues to progress, the chemical connections between these cells are lost and will result in some of these cells dying. The most common problem that is first noticed in an individual with Alzheimer’s are issues with day-to-day memory, such as communicating using the right word (the individual struggles to find the correct word to communicate). There may also be issues with general problem solving and decision making, in addition to issues with three-dimensional perception.

**Vascular Dementia**

Vascular dementia is caused when the oxygen supply provided to the brain is reduced due narrowing/blockage of blood vessels, causing some brain cells to be damaged and/or die. Vascular dementia can be developed due to one more serious stroke, but can also be developed over time through a series of strokes or other incidents that result in damage to blood vessels in the brain. The symptoms of vascular dementia overlap with those of Alzheimer’s but, periods of noticeable confusion are also prominent.

**Dementia with Lewy Bodies**

This form of dementia is caused by tiny structures (known as Lewy Bodies) which develop inside brain cells. These abnormal structures are responsible for causing a lack of balance of the brain’s normal chemistry and will eventually cause the death of brain cells. Early symptoms of this form of dementia may include varying levels of alertness, significant
difficulty when judging distance and even hallucinations. When compared to Alzheimer’s disease, day-to-day memory is affected less during the early stages. Dementia with Lewy bodies shares many of the same symptoms as Parkinson’s disease including difficulty in muscle movement.

**Frontotemporal Dementia**

Frontotemporal dementia is caused when the front side sections of the brain are damaged by abnormal proteins. These abnormal proteins which are located inside nerve cells will cause brain cells to die. Frontotemporal dementia can be most distinguished by noticeable changes in both personality and behavior. However, difficulty with language/verbal communication is also common.

**Mixed Dementia**

Unfortunately, it is possible (and even common) for an individual to be afflicted with more than one form of dementia. This can cause a wide array of symptoms to be present within the individual.

**Early vs. Late Stages of Dementia**

As stated before, dementia is progressive. This is because as time goes on, more brain cells will be affected. Dementia can differ more during the early stages, but as the disease progresses, symptoms will become more similar across the varying forms of dementia. This is because more of the brain becomes affected as the different diseases progress. During the later stages of dementia, a patient will require significantly more care and assistance than during the early stages of dementia. For individuals who are in the end stages of dementia, hospice is available. Hospice care for dementia patients has significant benefits for patients and their families who may be struggling with the physical, mental and
emotional burdens caused by watching a loved one struggle with dementia.

Who Is Affected By Dementia?

The various forms of dementia affects millions of individuals in the U.S. every year. Dementia typically affects older individuals but it can affect younger individuals as well. Dementia affects both men and women. There is a genetic component to dementia that should be considered. In a small percentage of people, dementia has been shown to be inherited from a single familial gene. The much larger percentage will inherit a combination of different genes that will effectively increase or decrease a person’s potential to become afflicted with dementia.

Diagnosing Dementia

Becoming more forgetful on a day-to-day basis does not mean someone has dementia. Memory loss can be attributed to a variety of stressors and other factors such as stress, mild to serious depression or other certain physical illnesses. However, an individual noticing significant memory deterioration coupled with the symptoms that were listed above should consult their physician.

Proper assessment is critical in trying to properly diagnose any form of dementia. Dementia is generally diagnosed by a specialist such as a psychiatrist, a geriatrician or a neurologist. But consulting with a general practitioner who can recommend a specialist is not a bad step to take. Dementia screening does not rely upon one single test. A formal diagnosis is formed using a combination of the following:

- Taking into account family history.
- Performing cognitive tests of mental abilities that assess memory and general thinking.
Physical examination and blood tests – these are done in order to exclude other potential causes of the symptoms that the patient is experiencing.

A brain scan – this test is performed on more of an “as needed” basis.

Treatment of Dementia

The overwhelming majority of causes of dementia cannot be cured; however, research efforts continue to make progress in developing drugs, vaccines or other useful treatments. There are a number of effective measures that can be taken in order to help individuals living with dementia manage the illness better.

Lowering the Risk of Developing Dementia

Although the exact reason for the development of dementia cannot always easily be identified, there are clear directions that can be taken to lower the risk of developing both Alzheimer’s disease and vascular dementia. This includes taking measures to lower high blood pressure, increase physical exercise, maintain a healthy weight and avoid smoking. The reason for this is that each risk factor (high blood pressure, smoking, etc.) leads to the narrowing of arteries and prevent the healthy flow of oxygen.

Additionally, a balanced diet may be effective in reducing overall risk. This means having a diet that is low in saturated salt and sodium while also seeking balanced nutrition. Active mental engagement later in life may also help to reduce the risk of certain forms of dementia. Simple activities such as puzzling or reading may prove to be effective at this.
Harbor Light Can Support Dementia Patients and Their Families

Dementia is a leading cause of death in the United States and caring for an individual who is in the late stages of dementia. Hospice care is reserved for patients who are afflicted with a life-limiting illness such as dementia and are in the final six months of life as determined by a physician. Hospice care for Dementia/Alzheimer’s patients addresses the holistic needs of the patient while providing much needed support to family members. This includes catering to their physical, mental and emotional needs. If you have a loved one who is struggling with the late stages of dementia, contact Harbor Light Hospice by phone or, send us a message online to hear how we can support you and your loved one during this difficult time.