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Understanding Dementia

Dementia is the name for a group of brain conditions that make it harder to remember, reason, and communicate. The most common form of dementia is Alzheimer's disease. Other types include vascular dementia, frontotemporal dementia, and Lewy body dementia. Years ago, dementia was often called "senility." It was even thought to be a normal part of aging. We now know that it's not normal. It's caused by ongoing damage to cells in the brain.

Symptoms of Dementia

Symptoms differ depending on which parts of the brain are affected and the stage of the disease. The most common symptoms include:

- Memory loss, including trouble with directions and familiar tasks.
- Language problems, such as trouble getting words out or understanding what is said.
- Difficulty with planning, organizing, concentration, and judgment. This includes persons not being able to recognize their own symptoms.
- Changes in behavior and personality.

How Dementia Affects the Brain

The brain controls all the workings of the mind and body. Some parts of the brain control memory and language. Other parts control movement and coordination. With dementia, nerve cells in the brain are gradually damaged or destroyed. Why this occurs is not yet clear. But over time, parts of the brain begin to **atrophy** (shrink). Brain atrophy often starts in the part of the brain that controls memory, reasoning, and personality. Other parts of the brain may not be affected until much later in the illness.

The Stages of Dementia

Dementia is a progressive disease. This means it gets worse over time. Symptoms differ for each person, but there are three basic stages. Each may last from months to years.

- **In the early stage**, a person may seem forgetful, confused, or have changes in behavior. However, he or she may still be able to handle most tasks without help.
- **In the middle stage**, more and more help is needed with daily tasks. A person may have trouble recognizing friends and family members, wander, or get lost in familiar places. He or she may also become restless or moody.
- **In the late stage**, Alzheimer's can cause severe problems with memory, judgment, and other skills. Help is needed with nearly every aspect of daily life.

Treating Dementia

At present, there's no cure for dementia. But with proper care, many people can live comfortably for years.

- **Medications** are a key part of treatment. Some types can help slow the progression of symptoms, such as memory loss. Others can help ease mood, behavior, and sleep problems.
- **Activity and Exercise** are good for body and mind. They may even help slow the progression of the disease. Simple, repetitive activities are good choices.
- **Regular doctor visits** help keep track of symptoms and overall health.