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What is dementia?

Dementia is a general deterioration in memory, learning, orientation, language, comprehension and judgment due to a disorder of the brain. Though it is usually chronic, certain reversible forms of dementia are caused by treatable disorders such as nutritional deficiency or infection. After age 65, the chance of developing dementia doubles every five years. Hypertension, diabetes, high cholesterol and smoking increase the risk for dementia. The most common underlying conditions are Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia, dementia with Lewy bodies and frontotemporal dementia (e.g. Pick's Disease). Other diseases such as diabetes and hypertension can cause symptoms of dementia. Perhaps the most common cases are mixed forms.

For family and caregivers, the common behavioral and psychological symptoms linked to dementia, typically occurring late in the course of the disease, have the greatest impact on quality of life. Common behaviors include agitation, aggression, yelling, sleep disturbance, wandering and apathy. Common psychological symptoms include anxiety, depression, delusions, hallucinations, and psychosis.

Much more research is needed to develop better prevention and treatment strategies. Currently, the main goals for dementia care are early and proper **diagnosis**, optimizing **health**, detecting and treating **behavioral and psychological symptoms**, and providing **information** and long-term **support** to caregivers and families. The person with dementia needs to be treated at all times with patience, respect, and dignity. With the proper support, persons effected by dementia can continue with their lives in their own communities. Living well with dementia is possible!

Treatments are available for most core symptoms of dementia but these treatments do not alter the progressive course of the disease. *Perhaps most importantly, non-pharmacological interventions -- such as a simple change to the home environment or caregiver approach -- may be as effective as drugs in many areas.* Unfortunately, non-pharmacological interventions have not been extensively researched and are often not effectively promoted without a dedicated advocate.

Source: "World Alzheimer Report 2009," Alzheimer's Disease International,
<http://www.alz.co.uk/research/files/World%20Alzheimer%20Report.pdf>