

MY LOVED ONE MAY HAVE DEMENTIA, WHAT DO I DO?

Recognising the early signs of dementia

With ageing comes many different ailments and if you've started to notice something different about your loved one, it doesn't necessarily mean that they have dementia.

Realising that something has changed, for the worse, in your loved one takes enormous courage. After all, this may be your mom or dad who cared for you, or your wife or husband who has always been able to take care of themselves and your family. It is not something we want to easily accept or can even recognise initially.

When trying to understand memory loss, it is important to differentiate between "normal" ageing and changes that indicate a deterioration in health. Some memory lapses are normal, and relatively frequent throughout a healthy life. Forgetting where you placed your car keys or not buying everything on your grocery list happens to the best of us, however when memory loss starts to affect your loved one's wellbeing, health and safety it could be a sign of dementia. The early signs of dementia are very subtle and vague and may not be immediately obvious. Early symptoms can vary from individual to individual and whilst one thinks that only memory loss is associated with dementia it is important to know what the other signs are that one should look out for. Memory loss, changes in mood and personality, difficulty completing familiar tasks, misplacing items, poor or impaired judgement, bad money management, disoriented in familiar environments, getting lost in public, trouble following along with a discussion and forgetting commonly used words are all early warning signs. If your loved one is experiencing these signs then it may be time to take some significant decisions about their care

Did you know?

Dementia is not a normal part of ageing and needs to be treated expertly and specifically.

Many types of dementia are progressive, meaning symptoms start out slowly and gradually get worse. If you or a loved one is experiencing memory difficulties or other changes in thinking skills, don't ignore them. See a doctor soon to determine the cause. Professional evaluation may detect a treatable condition. Even if symptoms suggest dementia, early diagnosis allows a person to get the maximum benefit from available treatments and it also provides time to plan for the future. If you feel that your loved one may be affected by dementia, we sincerely encourage you to consult our expert therapists at Livewell who can address all your questions and concerns.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I REALISE SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH MY LOVED ONE?

1. Discuss the worrying symptoms

There's a high chance that your loved one has also noticed their symptoms and can feel a change in their own behaviour. Instead of talking to them, rather engage with them and make them feel included in the discussion. At Livewell we encourage dealing with dementia on the base of: **'Not about me, not without me'**. While this is not possible in all cases, it is certainly meaningful and helpful to your personal journey to try it anyway. The discussion may also come as a relief to your loved one, as they will be able to express their concerns about their own health and feel included in the decision making process.

2. Consult with a GP

A recent development in dementia related diagnoses is Subjective Cognitive Decline; when your loved one realises that something is not quite right or they don't feel like themselves. When this happens, consult with a GP or specialist. There may be few physical symptoms that a GP can look out for in your family member. Note that thorough evaluation is needed to deduce if changes are taking place in your loved one's brain. This can be an invasive process, so ensure that your loved one feels supported and respected at all times.

3. Schedule specialist appointments

Whilst a GP appointment is a good start, we recommend a full assessment at either a Physician, Neurologist or Psychiatrist. Actively seek the best opinion you can afford, as the accurate and timely diagnosis of dementia is of critical importance, and its misdiagnosis equally so.

4. Begin a Plan of Action

Your specialist will be of great value here. There is no formulaic process with dementia, but here are some things to consider when putting together your plan of action:

- Your financial position
- The person with dementia's wishes
- Your area and resources available
- Your family dynamics; care in a home or with a family member
- What is best for my loved one?

HOW CAN I GET AN ACCURATE DIAGNOSIS FOR DEMENTIA RELATED SYMPTOMS?

Dementia is a specialised area of expertise and requires a specialised, and not general, approach. A visit to the following specialists should achieve an accurate diagnosis:

Physician

Physicians focus on the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of diseases and disability. Physicians are holistic and thorough before making a diagnosis, and efficient in eliminating the possibility of reversible dementias (or wrongly diagnosed dementias). As a rule, it is good for geriatrics to visit geriatric physicians at least once a year, or at the intervals discussed with your GP. Geriatric Physicians will also monitor and evaluate your loved one's progress on many vital functions, such as medication and dosage, blood pressure, sugar levels and cholesterol.

Neurologist

A neurologist is a specialist in the diagnosis of diseases of the nervous system. Neurologists often rely on scans of the brain when making a diagnosis of dementia. If Parkinson's or other neurological conditions are also a factor, visiting a neurologist is an excellent recommendation.

Psychiatrist

Psychiatrists are specialists in mental health. At Livewell, we like to refer people to psychiatrists when there are behaviours that are cause for concern, or changes in their mental wellbeing. It is always good to have a psychiatrist on your multi-disciplinary team to walk this journey with you.

We advise that you accompany your loved one to all their doctors' visits and not let them go alone. Ensuring that there is always someone trusted and caring with them will help them to feel safe and secure. Being there to understand the information regarding tests and procedures is extremely important and beneficial to you both.

In South Africa, most doctors complete a questionnaire called the Mini-Mental State Exam. However, this on its own is not sufficient in making a dementia diagnosis. Doctors will also perform blood tests, or may require brain scans as well. A detailed background is also required, so please record the changes in your loved one and family history beforehand.

MY LOVED ONE HAS BEEN DIAGNOSED WITH DEMENTIA, BUT IS STILL LIVING AT HOME. HOW DO I SUPPORT AND CARE FOR THEM?

There is a saying in the dementia care world that *'If you've met one person with dementia, you have met one person with dementia.'* That is, each individual will talk, act, remember, and behave differently, not simply because of what stage of dementia they are in, but because they are who they are. There is no "one size fits all" when it comes to living with dementia.

Caring for a loved one with dementia in your home can range from very easy to almost impossible depending on their symptoms. Before you begin home care, we advise that you have a plan of action ready for various potentially negative situations such as physical issues like broken hips, diabetes, being unable to chew or swallow, etc. Preparing in advance and having made your decisions already can reduce the stress that arises when these situations occur.

A significant factor to consider is that when moved early in their illness, those with dementia adapt easier to life in a 'home' for the elderly. Allow your doctor, and your loved one's safety, to be your guides here. When supervision or additional safety measures start becoming more frequently reminded at home it places strain on the time and emotional resources of the family members and caregivers. This places additional stress alongside a situation that has already significantly changed your lifestyle.

Stimulation while your loved one is living at home should also be monitored. Be wary that the person might become socially isolated or bored. Having meaning and purpose remains important to those living with dementia. Consider visiting an Occupational Therapist to assist you and your loved one in creating a constructive weekly program filled with activities and exercises.

At Livewell, our programs, facilities, financial breakdown and experts are available to you at any time. Please visit us as soon as you begin your decision-making process, rather than letting a crisis dictate your family's choices for your mom or dad.

Joining a local support group will help you in many ways. Support groups are a safe environment that lets people share and receive support from each other as well as get professional advice from experts in dementia care. Livewell support groups are filled with information, emotional reinforcement and laughter. Contact us for more information on our informal talks and support groups.