

IRREVERSIBLE DEMENTIAS

ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of irreversible dementia, accounting for about 60 percent of all cases. It affects as many as four million Americans. Alzheimer's is a degenerative disease that attacks a person's brain over a period of three to 20 years. Advances in diagnostic techniques make it possible for physicians to accurately diagnose Alzheimer's 85 to 90 percent of the time after symptoms occur. However, only a postmortem brain autopsy offers a definitive diagnosis for this disease.

VASCULAR DEMENTIA

Vascular dementia or Multi-infarct (MID) is caused by multiple strokes in the brain. Dementia symptoms may seem to appear suddenly, but they usually develop over time following a series of mini-strokes. A Vascular dementia diagnosis is derived from neurological exams and brain scans. It is not reversible or curable, but detection and treatment of high blood pressure and other vascular risk factors can modify its progression.

PARKINSON'S DISEASE

More than one million Americans have Parkinson's disease, a progressive disorder of the central nervous system. As with Alzheimer's, the cause or causes of Parkinson's are still unknown. This disease is characterized by tremors, stiffness in limbs and joints, speech problems, and difficulty initiating physical movement. Individuals with advanced Parkinson's can develop dementia and eventually Alzheimer's disease, while some Alzheimer's patients will develop Parkinson's.

HUNTINGTON'S DISEASE

Huntington's disease (HD) is an inherited, degenerative, brain disease. It causes both physical and mental disabilities, usually beginning in mid-life. Early symptoms vary, but can include involuntary movement of the limbs or facial muscles, difficulty concentrating, depression, personality change, memory disturbance, slurred speech, and impaired judgment. Today's genetic tests can confirm a diagnosis of this disease and identify carriers of the HD gene.

CREUTZFELDT-JAKOB DISEASE

A rare brain disorder, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) causes rapid, progressive dementia and other neuromuscular disturbances. The disease can be inherited, but it is most often transmitted by a prion or protein particle. Early symptoms include failing memory, behavior changes, and loss of coordination. The disease usually advances very rapidly and a definitive diagnosis can only be obtained through a brain autopsy.

PICK'S DISEASE

Pick's disease is another rare brain disorder that usually begins between the ages of 40 and 60. Symptoms are similar to Alzheimer's disease and include the loss of language abilities, skilled movement, and ability to recognize objects or people. It is characterized by tissue shrinkage in the brain's frontal and temporal lobes and the presence of abnormal bodies in affected nerve cells. A brain autopsy is also needed for a definitive diagnosis.

LEWY BODY DEMENTIA

The last form of irreversible dementia is Lewy body dementia (LBD), which is named for its abnormal protein deposits in the brain. LBD causes memory loss, confusion, and communications difficulty. Hallucinations and paranoia may also develop in the early stages and can continue throughout the LBD process.

THE SYMPTOMS OF DEMENTIA

MEMORY

The hallmark of dementia is impairment with respect to recent events, what is often referred to as "working memory." Forgetting appointments, conversations, and the like typically herald the onset of dementia. New learning becomes defective whereas memories from the distant past may be intact.

ORIENTATION

The inability to know one's place and time may also be indicative of dementia - for example, getting lost outside one's home or not knowing the month or year.

LANGUAGE

Word finding difficulty is also typically seen among persons with dementia. Comprehension of spoken language may also be impaired. Rules of syntax and grammar may be impaired although speech itself may be intact.

JUDGMENT

Reasoning skills, especially with respect to abstract tasks, are often impaired resulting in poor judgment.

VISUOSPATIAL SKILLS

Distortions in interpreting one's environment may also be seen in dementia. Although eyesight itself may be well preserved, the brain's ability to accurately interpret what one is seeing may be impaired.

CONCENTRATION

The ability to pay attention or concentrate may also be impaired. This may be seen in difficulty with making change or balancing a checkbook.

ABILITY TO SEQUENCE TASKS

Performing any task requires the ability to put a series of steps together in the right order. Someone with dementia may forget the steps in preparing a meal or shopping for groceries.