

Care Partner Information

Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia Caregiving Tips

Testing for Dementia

In the early stages of dementia, many people often don't realize there is anything wrong. Many view memory problems as a normal part of aging. Or, they might realize there is a problem with their memory, but not tell anyone about it.

If you know someone having memory problems, they should get tested. Testing can find out if someone really has dementia. That's important because memory problems might be caused by something else. Examples are depression, medicine side effects, thyroid problems, vitamin deficiencies, or alcohol use. Those problems can sometimes be fixed. Dementia cannot.

No single test can prove that a person has dementia. Rather, a complete exam is needed. This can be done by many kinds of health care providers—in primary care, geriatrics, neurology, psychiatry, or psychology.

Home Tests for Dementia

Many dementia tests are available online or by mail. These tests are not recommended. Home screening tests can never take the place of an in-person medical exam.

What Happens When Getting Checked for Dementia?

During an office visit, the provider will ask about any current or past illnesses. These might include high blood pressure, diabetes, strokes, head injury, and others. They will also ask about medicines being taken. And, they may ask about diet, exercise, smoking, and use of alcohol. Other questions will be about whether family members have had dementia.

Next, the provider will check whether the person can think clearly. They may ask the patient to remember things, draw things, explain things, or solve simple problems. They will also find out if the person knows where they are and what day it is.

After that, there will be a physical exam. This involves checking the heart, lungs, reflexes, and other things. Blood tests are also usually done.

This Care Partner Information page is part of a series on caregiving tips. They are written to help family and community caregivers, direct care workers and community health representatives care for someone with Alzheimer's disease or other types of dementia. Available in English and Spanish at www.aging.arizona.edu

The person may also get brain scans (pictures of the brain), called CT or MRI. These pictures can help show if the brain looks like dementia is present, or if some other condition is causing memory problems. Sometimes there may be need for an extra evaluation by certain types of specialists.

Picking the Right Provider

Not all health care providers see many patients with dementia. Some are not comfortable telling patients they have dementia. In fact, less than half of seniors diagnosed with dementia, or their families, report actually being told they have dementia. So, before making an appointment to see someone about memory problems, ask how often they see patients who are getting checked for dementia.

Things to Consider When Choosing a Provider for Dementia Testing

- Call your local Area Agency on Aging to find out who to see, or...
- Call your local Alzheimer's Association Chapter to find out what they recommend.
- Make sure that the provider accepts the person's insurance. With no insurance, dementia checks can be expensive!
- If the person has a primary care provider they are comfortable with, call them first. Check to make sure that the provider is comfortable seeing patients with dementia. If not, ask for a referral.
- Many hospitals have memory clinics where people can get checked for dementia. These clinics have doctors who specialize in dementia.
- Prepare for the visit:
 - Bring a list of medical problems and how long they have been present.
 - Bring a copy of the person's health history.
 - Bring a list of medications, vitamins, and herbal remedies.

Testing and Diagnosis Can Bring Better Quality of Life

Testing for dementia can be stressful. But early testing and knowing about dementia can help patients and their loved ones live higher quality lives. By knowing and planning ahead, they can avoid unnecessary problems, and live how they choose.

Useful Websites

<http://www.alz.org/facts/>

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