

Common Health Problems in Dementia



SCHIZOPHRENIA RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Dementia Care in SCARF (DEMCARES)



Who We Are

Dementia Care in Scarf (DEMCARES) is a project funded by the Infosys Foundation. DEMCARES is an integral part of the Schizophrenia Research Foundation (SCARF), Chennai, which is a non-governmental, non-profit organization. One of the premier institutes in Asia for mental health research and training, SCARF is one of the very few NGOs in the world to be named as a Collaborating Centre of the World Health Organization (WHO) for Mental Health Research and Training.

At DEMCARES, we offer clinical services including outpatient consultation for geriatric mental health issues, home assessments, therapeutic interventions for people with dementia, support services for caregivers of people with dementia, as well as providing research contributions within the field of dementia. We also offer training in dementia care for healthcare staff and caregivers.

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Health Problems in People with Dementia

Many health problems may be present in a person with dementia (PwD). In some people, existing physical health problems such as heart disease, diabetes or high blood pressure may cause or hasten the progress of dementia. In others, the presence of dementia may worsen the related health problem.

This leaflet will discuss some of the common health problems present in a person with dementia, and simple tips to help manage them.



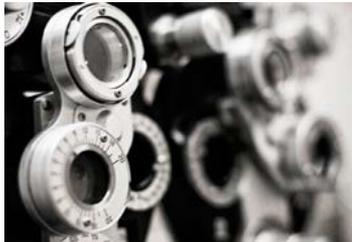
Vision Problems

Poor vision in the elderly can be attributed to cataract or changes in the retina, which is the light sensitive tissue in the eye. The problem occurs and progresses gradually.

Poor vision may cause the PwD to lose interest in recreational activities such as reading, watching TV, knitting, etc. They may also need help with daily activities in the evenings or in a dimly lit environment.

“They may misunderstand shadows, floor patterns, or curtains as threats. This may result in behavioural changes.”

An assessment by a qualified optician is recommended. Make sure that the person with dementia wears their glasses and ensures that their home is well lit. Curtains or patterned floors could be changed to plain non-patterned ones.



Hearing Problems

Age-related hearing loss, prolonged exposure to loud noises and accumulation of wax in the ear canal are some of the causes for hearing troubles in the elderly.

Many people with poor hearing ability may gradually stop socialising. This often results in social isolation and difficulty in understanding others, leading to irritation and uneasiness.

An ENT specialist should assess the causes for loss in hearing. They will provide with suitable solutions such as hearing aids, listening devices etc.,

In addition, the following may help:

- Inform family, friends and carers regarding PwD's hearing impairment so that they understand their problem and in turn help alleviate their distress.
- People around the PwD will need to raise their voice but should neither yell nor speak in monosyllables.
- It is important to grab the PwD's attention before starting to speak to them; face them so your facial expressions, body language, and lip movements can help them in understanding you better.

- Reducing background noise e.g. turning off the TV/radio, shutting the window (if there is noise from outside), etc. can help the PwD hear and understand better.



Constipation

Poor nutrition, low liquid intake, lack of physical activity and side effects of certain medications are some of the common causes for constipation in the elderly.

“In a person with dementia, constipation may contribute to significant changes in behaviour as they may be

unable to express their discomforts and pain.”

Constipation is extremely common in the elderly and could also cause **delirium**. Delirium is nothing but rapid and fluctuating change of consciousness in a person and related behavioural changes. The best strategy to tackle constipation is to prevent it. Laxatives should be avoided unless advised by a doctor.



Here are some tips to remedy the problem:

- Including fibrous food like fruits and vegetables in the diet on a regular basis.



- Drinking plenty of liquids is encouraged unless suggested otherwise by the doctor.



- Engaging in exercise regularly.



- Seek medical advice if constipation persists or occurs often.

Incontinence

Wetting and soiling may occur in a PwD due to many reasons. They may be caused by chronic physical health problems such as infections, constipation, or progression of dementia. Sometimes the PwD either may not be able to locate the bathroom due to disorientation, or may not be able to

communicate their need to answer nature's calls due to communication problems.

Establishing the cause(s) of loss of bowel control and dealing with the issue hands-on would help in managing the problem:

- If the PwD is unable to communicate their need to use the toilet, having regularly scheduled toilet timings with assistance would help.
- If the PwD is unable to locate the toilet due to disorientation, having a sign/direction board, or having a picture of the toilet on the toilet door may help.
- If the PwD has poor eyesight, leaving the toilet door open with the lights on at night can be helpful.
- Removing clutters in the room and providing direct access to the toilet often helps people with dementia.

In advanced cases, adult diapers may be necessary to help manage involuntary urination or defecation.



Dental Problems

Older people often have problems with teeth, in fact, many wear dentures. Any pain or discomfort in teeth, gums and/or ill-fitting dentures can result in pain.

Those with dementia may be unable to express their pain and discomfort clearly. Often they may have difficulties with eating and drinking. In fact, they may even refuse to eat due to this persisting pain.

Being alert to dental problems is the best way to detect them. If you suspect something to be wrong, a consultation with a dentist is necessary. Remember, it is important to inform the dentist about dementia. The PwD will need guidance in following the instructions of the dentist, which may include medications, rinsing, and cleaning of the mouth and dentures regularly.



Poor nutrition

A well balanced diet is important to maintain health and well-being. However, a PwD may have difficulties with sufficient intake of a well-balanced and nutritious diet due to many reasons. These may include dental problems, poor communication, lack of access to food

due to disorientation, poor vision or mobility, inability to cook, difficulties with chewing and swallowing, loss of appetite due to conditions such as depression, pain, constipation etc., and various other health problems.

Regular monitoring of the quantity, type of food consumed and weight of the PwD will help in identifying the cause of poor nutrition. Once identified, they should then be redressed in a systematic manner. Simple strategies such as providing simple but nutritious food, regular supervision at meal times, accommodating the person's likes and dislikes, and avoiding attention consuming activities such as television etc., during meal times can prove useful.



Mobility and falls

Lack of free movement and increased risk of falls are common among the older population. Neurological conditions, joint related problems, poor vision, and issues with the living environment such as clutter, stairs,

uneven surfaces, and lack of mobility aids like walking sticks or walkers are often contributory causes to high rates of falls among the elderly.

“Given the risk of bone fractures in the elderly due to falls, it is important to be alert to the risks of falls and prevent them.”

Evaluating both the PwD and their living environment is important. Simple exercises as advised by a physiotherapist can help enhance the ability to move freely and effortlessly. Removing clutter, providing walking aids and installing grab rails can also minimize the risks of falls.

