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Association for Dementia and Alzheimer's of South Africa

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Common types of Dementia

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Dementia is not a natural part of getting older. It is caused by different diseases or injuries that damage the brain resulting in different types of dementia. Dementia is a group of symptoms that get worse over time, including memory loss, confusion, problems with language and understanding, changes in behaviour and needing help with daily tasks.

Alzheimer's disease

Alzheimer's disease is the most common type of dementia. It is caused when proteins that are not formed properly build up inside the brain. These proteins join together into structures called 'plaques' and 'tangles' which stop the brain from working correctly and brain cells die. Alzheimer's affects many brain functions like memory, attention, concentration, planning, language and communication, confusion about time and place, judgement, behaviour and social abilities. These changes make it harder for a person to do everyday things and affect their ability to function normally.

Vascular dementia

Vascular dementia is the second most common type of dementia. It happens when the brain is not receiving enough blood to work properly. There are different types, the main two being stroke-related dementia and subcortical vascular dementia. Memory loss does not always happen in the early stages, but symptoms like difficulty planning and coordination, concentrating, being easily confused, difficulty walking and keeping balance, becoming anxious, depressed or easily irritated. Vascular dementia is different from other dementias because it's caused by problems with blood circulation in the brain.

Dementia with Lewy-bodies

Dementia with Lewy bodies (DLB) is caused by Lewy body disease. Lewy bodies are tiny clumps of protein that develop in the brain and stop it from working properly. Dementia with Lewy bodies is closely related to Parkinson's disease and often has similar symptoms. The symptoms are changing levels of alertness, erratic sleep pattern and dreams, difficulty with attention, planning, organising, and reasoning, hallucinations, and delusions, judging distances, seeing objects clearly, difficulty with movement and balance, and problems with how the body works, such as constipation and losing some sense of smell and/or taste.

Frontotemporal lobe dementia (FTD)

Frontotemporal dementia (FTD) is caused by damage from clumps of protein that stop the front and side parts of the brain from working properly. These parts of the brain control behaviour, planning, problem-solving, emotional responses, and language skills. The person might present with unsuitable social behaviour, changes in personality, be emotionally inappropriate, impulsive, and struggle with language skills. Frontal lobe dementia usually occurs at a younger age compared to other forms of dementia and can have a significant impact on daily functioning and relationships. Early diagnosis and care are essential for managing the condition and providing support to those affected.

Korsakoff syndrome / Korsakoff's dementia

Korsakoff's dementia is a brain disorder caused by a lack of vitamin B1 (thiamine), often due to chronic alcohol abuse. It leads to severe memory problems, confusion, and difficulties forming new memories. People with this condition may also create false memories to compensate for their memory loss. Treatment involves thiamine supplements and support for coping with memory difficulties.

Mixed Dementia

Some people have more than one type of dementia. The most common combination is Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia. Someone with mixed dementia is likely to experience a mixture of symptoms of their different types of dementia. For example, a person with Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia might have problems with their memory (Alzheimer's disease) as well as difficulty thinking quickly (vascular dementia) therefore it requires a comprehensive approach to address the specific challenges associated with each type of dementia present. The symptoms and progression of mixed dementia can vary depending on the types of dementia involved.

HIV-related Dementia

HIV-associated dementia is a chronic cognitive deterioration due to brain infection by HIV. It is a serious consequence of HIV infection and is typically seen in the advanced stages of the disease.

