



Care Partner Information

Tips for Providing Older Adult Care

Testing for Dementia

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

If someone is having memory problems, they should get tested. Testing can help the person to know if it really is dementia, or something else. For example, memory problems can also be caused by depression, medicine side effects, thyroid problems, too little of the right vitamins in the diet, or alcohol use. These problems can sometimes be fixed.

No single test can prove that a person has dementia. A complete exam is needed. This can be done by many kinds of doctors. The best place to start is talking to a primary care doctor.

Home Tests for Dementia

Many dementia tests can be ordered online or by mail. The results from these tests are not always right. It is best to go to a doctor who will check for lots of things that may cause memory loss.

What Happens When Getting Checked for Dementia?

The doctor 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. It is important to tell the doctor if other family members have had dementia.

Next, the doctor will check if the person is thinking 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, the doctor will do a physical exam. They will check the heart, lungs, and other things. Usually, they also do a blood test.

This Care Partner Information page is part of a series on older adult caregiving tips. They are written to help family and community caregivers, direct care workers and community health representatives care for older adults. Available in English and Spanish at www.aging.arizona.edu

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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.

How to Choose a Doctor for Dementia Testing

Ask the Area Agency on Aging for a list of local geriatricians (doctors who focus on older adults)

Talk to the Alzheimer’s Association.

Ask if the provider takes the person’s insurance. Without insurance, dementia checks can cost a lot.

If the person has a doctor they like, call them first. Ask if the doctor is comfortable testing patients for 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

Alzheimer’s Association: <http://www.alz.org/facts/>

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Alzheimer’s disease and Related Dementia ~ Care Partner Information

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