



A Patient's Guide to Vascular Dementia



This material is provided by UCSF Weill Institute for Neurosciences as an educational resource for patients.

UCSF Weill Institute for Neurosciences
Memory and Aging Center

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What is dementia?

When medical professionals use the term “dementia,” it refers to a brain problem that makes it difficult for a person to complete daily tasks without help. Symptoms of dementia vary from person to person and may include memory problems, mood changes, or difficulty walking, speaking, or finding your way. There are many causes for dementia; vascular dementia is one of them.

What is vascular dementia?

Vascular dementia is a condition that causes changes in thinking skills. Vascular dementia can cause problems with memory, speech, or balance. These changes can happen suddenly or begin mildly and get worse over time.

What causes vascular dementia?

Vascular dementia is caused by conditions that damage blood vessels, reducing or blocking blood flow to the brain. A stroke may block an artery and cause many different symptoms that may include memory, thinking, or movement changes. Other conditions, like diabetes or high blood pressure, can damage blood vessels and eventually lead to problems with memory or thinking skills.

What are the risk factors for vascular dementia?

- Age
- Smoking
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Diabetes
- Little or no physical exercise
- Unhealthy diet
- Obesity
- Hardening of the arteries anywhere in the body

How is age related to vascular dementia?

Most people with vascular dementia start having symptoms after age 65, although the risk is significantly higher for people in their 80s and 90s.

What happens in vascular dementia?

Vascular dementia can cause different symptoms depending on where the blood vessels are damaged in the brain. For example, a person who had a stroke may have sudden problems with memory, balance, or speech. However, a person can have several strokes that may be unnoticeably small, but the damage can add up over time.

Many people with vascular dementia have trouble with memory. Others may have difficulty with organization and solving complex problems, slowed thinking, or being easily distracted. People with vascular dementia may also have changes in mood or behavior, such as irritability, loss of interest, or depression.

Sometimes, people with vascular dementia have trouble with balance and movement. This might include weakness on one side of the body, and the symptoms may get worse over time.

Are there medicines to treat vascular dementia?

Though there is no cure for vascular dementia yet, there are medications that can help manage the symptoms. Sometimes medications used to treat memory problems in Alzheimer's disease may be helpful for vascular dementia. Sometimes, people with vascular dementia can have mood changes, such as depression or irritability. These can be managed by medications like the ones used for depression or anxiety.

What other things help?

In addition to medications, there are various ways to help a person with vascular dementia. Research has shown that physical exercise and maintaining a healthy weight help to enhance brain health and reduce the risk for heart problems, stroke, and other disease that affect blood vessels. A balanced diet, enough sleep, and limited alcohol intake are other important ways to promote good brain health and reduce the risk for heart disease. Other illnesses that affect the brain, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol, should also be treated if present.

Resources

Family Caregiver Alliance: caregiver.org

National Institutes of Health: nih.gov, nihseniorhealth.gov

American Stroke Association: strokeassociation.org

American Heart Association: heart.org

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS): ninds.nih.gov

Blood Pressure: nihseniorhealth.gov/highbloodpressure/whatishighbp/01.html

Cholesterol: nihseniorhealth.gov/highbloodcholesterol/whatishighbloodcholesterol/01.html

Diabetes: nihseniorhealth.gov/diabetes/diabetesdefined/01.html

Eating Well: nihseniorhealth.gov/eatingwellasyougetolder/benefitsofeatingwell/01.html

Exercise: nihseniorhealth.gov/exerciseforolderadults/healthbenefits/01.html

Smoking Cessation: nihseniorhealth.gov/quittingsmoking/quittingwhenyoureolder/01.html

Research: clinicaltrials.gov