

# What is the Difference Between Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease?

In a nutshell, dementia is a symptom, and Alzheimer's Disease (AD) is the cause of the symptom. When someone is told they have dementia, it means that they have significant memory problems as well as other cognitive difficulties, and that these problems are severe enough to get in the way of daily living.

Too often, patients and their family members are told by their doctors that the patient has been diagnosed with "a little bit of dementia." They leave the doctor's visit with a feeling of relief that at least they don't have AD.

There is great confusion about the difference between "dementia" and "AD." The confusion is felt on the part of patients, family members, the media and even healthcare providers.

"Dementia" is a term that has replaced a more out-of-date word, "senility," to refer to cognitive changes with advanced age. Dementia includes a group of symptoms, the most prominent of which is memory difficulty with additional problems in at least one other area of cognitive functioning, including language, attention, problem solving, spatial skills, judgment, planning or organization. These cognitive problems are a noticeable change compared to the person's cognitive functioning earlier in life and are severe

enough to get in the way of normal daily living, such as social and occupational activities.

A good analogy for the term dementia is "fever." Fever refers to an elevated temperature, indicating that a person is sick. But it does not give any information about what is causing the sickness. In the same way, dementia means that there is something wrong with a person's brain, but it does not provide any information about what is causing the memory or cognitive difficulties. Dementia is not a disease; it is the clinical presentation or symptoms of a disease.

There are many possible causes of dementia. Some causes are reversible, such as certain thyroid conditions or vitamin deficiencies. If these underlying problems are identified and treated, then the dementia reverses and the person can return to normal functioning.

However, most causes of dementia are not reversible. Rather, they are degenerative diseases of the brain that get worse over time. The most common cause of dementia is AD, accounting for as many as 70-80% of all cases of dementia.

Approximately 5.8 million Americans currently live with AD. As people get older, the prevalence of AD increases, with approximately 50% of people age 85 and

older having the disease.

It is important to note, however, that although AD is extremely common in later years of life, it is not part of normal aging. If someone has dementia (due to whatever underlying cause), it represents an important problem in need of appropriate diagnosis and treatment by a well-trained healthcare provider who specializes in degenerative diseases.

Most of the time, dementia is caused by the specific brain disease, AD. However, some uncommon degenerative causes of dementia include vascular dementia (also referred to as multi-infarct dementia), frontotemporal dementia, Lewy Body disease, and chronic traumatic encephalopathy.

Contrary to what some people may think, dementia is not a less severe problem, with AD being a more severe problem. There is not a continuum with dementia on one side and AD at the extreme. Rather, there can be early or mild stages of AD, which then progress to moderate and severe stages of the disease.

*Information in this article written by Dr. Robert Stern, Director of the BU ADC Clinical Core. The full article is available online at [www.alzheimersreadingroom.com](http://www.alzheimersreadingroom.com)*

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