



## FACT SHEET 5

# Dementia

### What is Dementia?

- The term 'dementia' describes the symptoms of a number of illnesses that cause a progressive decline in a person's everyday functioning. More than 100 conditions cause dementia.
- The symptoms of dementia can include loss of memory, impaired thinking, orientation and comprehension, a decline in social skills and associated personality changes. In the initial stages, dementia is often characterised by difficulties with the daily tasks of living. Later, dementia can progress so that there is a loss of capacity of the individual to act independently.
- Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia and accounts for between 50 per cent and 70 per cent of all cases (Alzheimer's Australia 2005).
- Currently, there is no cure for dementia, but there are treatments and medications that can relieve some of the symptoms. In 2007 there were more than 130 trials for Alzheimer's drugs underway in Australia (AIHW 2007: 86).
- Research findings to date indicate that preventive factors include daily exercise including walking and gardening, continuing education, controlling cardiovascular risk factors, moderation of alcohol intake, and keeping socially active (AIHW 2007: 86).

### Prevalence of Dementia

- Although not restricted to older people, dementia is most prevalent for people aged 65 and over.
- Around one person in fifteen aged 65 or over has dementia (Alzheimer's Australia 2008).
- Of people aged 85 and over, one in four have dementia (AIHW 2007: foreword).
- As the population aged 65 and over increases, so too will the number of people with dementia.
- In 2008, there are 227,300 Australians with dementia (Alzheimer's Australia 2008), almost two-thirds of whom are female (AIHW 2007: 87).
- It is projected that by 2050, 731,000 Australians will have dementia (Alzheimer's Australia 2008).
- 43 per cent of people with dementia are aged 75-84 years and 39 per cent are aged 85 years and over. A higher proportion of males than females with dementia are aged less than 75 years (AIHW 2007: 87).
- 56 per cent of people with dementia live in the community; 44 per cent live in cared accommodation. About half of all people in cared accommodation have dementia, and the majority of those require high care (AIHW 2007; 87-8).
- Dementia is the 5<sup>th</sup> leading burden of disease factor, and the second greatest single contributor to the cost of care in residential aged care, after incontinence (AIHW 2007: 86).
- Alzheimer's disease is the most frequent cause of dementia in the aged population, with 3% of people aged 65-74, 19% of people aged 75-84 and 47% of individuals over 85 years having Alzheimer's disease. In Western countries, Alzheimer's is the fourth most common cause of death (Hynd 2003).

- The Commonwealth's *Dementia Initiative* currently funds three university-based Dementia Collaborative Research Centres. These produce research on prevention and early intervention programs, improved care initiatives, and training for the health workforce.

## Support for People with Dementia, their Families and Carers

- With increasingly sophisticated diagnostic techniques and increased medication options, people are being diagnosed with dementia earlier in the course of the illness. In the early phase of the illness people are less likely to require formal support services but still benefit significantly from information and support.
- Aged Care Assessment Teams are able to assess older people with dementia to determine whether they are eligible for residential care or for some form of home based care including Community Aged Care Packages (CACPs), Extended Aged Care at Home (EACH), EACH Dementia (EACH D), Community Options Packages (COP's).
- Other community-based services that are available include the HACC Program and Day Therapy Centres.
- Specialised services such as the Victorian Cognitive, Dementia and Memory Services (CDAMS) provide assessment, diagnosis, information and advice, and Psychogeriatric Assessment Teams (PGAT) can provide assessment and treatment.
- Carer Resource Centres provide information, advice and referral services to carers and Carer Respite Centres provide information for carers on available respite services (see Carers Fact Sheet for more information).
- *Alzheimer's Australia* and its State and Territory associations, provides information, education and support services to people with dementia, their families and carers. Their website address is [www.alzheimers.org.au](http://www.alzheimers.org.au) or they can be contacted 24 hours a day on the Dementia Helpline: 1800 100 500.

## Living Arrangements for People with Dementia

- Many people with dementia are able to remain successfully in their own home and community, even if they live alone. Often, the familiarity of the home environment creates a positive and supportive experience that will be beneficial to the person with dementia.
- People remaining in their own home may require some assistance. This could range from home modifications to having a carer visit to assist with certain activities. Home modifications are usually made to compensate for cognitive deterioration and may include the labelling of drawers, erecting reminder signs and changing patterned décor to plain colours. For advice on managing daily living, and for a comprehensive list of support services and their contact details see the Alzheimer's Australia website (as above).
- It is estimated that approximately 43 per cent of people aged 65 and over living in households expressed a need for some kind of assistance to help them stay at home, including transport, property maintenance, housework, personal care, health care, mobility, communication, cognitive or emotional support (AIHW 2007: 102-3). Of those assessed as needing assistance, 64 per cent received assistance from formal care providers, including the Home and Community Care (HACC) Program, Community Aged Care Packages (CACP's) and Community Options or Linkages (AIHW 2007: 103).
- Of the people accessing community care services, it is estimated that approximately 18% of CACP recipients and 32% of EACH recipients suffer from dementia (AIHW 2004).

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