What is dementia?
The term “dementia” describes a group of symptoms that are caused by changes in brain function serious enough to interfere with daily life. These symptoms may include asking the same questions repeatedly; becoming lost in familiar places; being unable to follow directions; getting disoriented about time, people, and places; and neglecting personal safety, hygiene, and nutrition. People with dementia lose their abilities at different rates.

Many conditions can cause dementia symptoms. That’s why it is important to report to a doctor any signs of dementia as soon as possible.

Reversible Dementia: Dementia can result from conditions such as high fever, dehydration, vitamin deficiency and poor nutrition, bad reactions to medicines, problems with the thyroid gland, or a minor head injury. Medical conditions like these can be serious and should be treated by a doctor as soon as possible. Proper treatment may improve or even restore a person’s mental functioning. Emotional problems can lead to dementia. Feeling sad, lonely, worried, or bored may be more common for older people facing retirement or coping with the death of a spouse, relative or friend. Adapting to these changes can sometimes cause feelings of confusion or forgetfulness, but can be improved with the support of friends and family, or by professional help from a doctor or counselor.

Irreversible Dementia: Alzheimer’s disease is the most common irreversible dementia among older people. Other causes of irreversible dementia include blood vessel disease, other degenerative disorders such as Parkinson’s disease, slow-growing brain tumors, or infectious diseases such as AIDS.

What is Alzheimer’s disease?
The most common form of irreversible dementia among older people is Alzheimer’s disease, which initially involves the parts of the brain that control thought, memory and language. Although scientists are learning more every day, right now they still do not know what causes Alzheimer’s disease, and there is no cure. It is not a normal aging process.

Brain cells die much more rapidly than normal and connections between nerve cells are broken. Over time, the brain shrinks as shown in the picture to the right. Thinking and memory are impaired because there are fewer brain cells and messages can not be sent or received between the remaining brain cells.

For further information, please contact:
Gina Green-Harris, Director
Milwaukee Outreach Program and Services
Wisconsin Alzheimer’s Institute-Milwaukee Office
UW School of Medicine and Public Health
(414) 219-5083 | greenharris@wisc.edu
Or visit us online at wai.wisc.edu
Who is at risk?

Scientists do not yet fully understand what causes Alzheimer’s disease. There probably is not one single cause, but several factors that affect each person differently. African-Americans are at a greater risk of developing the disease than non-Hispanic Caucasians.

Risk factors for Alzheimer’s include:

- Age (65 years and older)
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Family history of memory problems
- Heart disease
- Diabetes
- Being female
- Obesity
- Inactivity

Warning signs

If someone has several or even most of these symptoms, it does not mean they definitely have the disease. It does mean they should be thoroughly examined by a medical specialist trained in evaluating memory disorders or at a memory disorder clinic with an entire team of experts knowledgeable about memory problems.

1. Asking the same question over and over again.
2. Repeating the same story, word for word, again and again.
3. Forgetting how to cook, or how to make repairs, or how to play cards — activities that were previously done with ease and regularity.
4. Losing one’s ability to pay bills or balance one’s checkbook.
5. Getting lost in familiar surroundings, or misplacing household objects.
6. Neglecting to bathe or wearing the same clothes over and over again, while insisting that they have taken a bath or that their clothes are still clean.
7. Relying on someone else, such as a spouse, to make decisions or answer questions they previously would have handled themselves.

For further information, please contact:
Gina Green-Harris, Director
Milwaukee Outreach Program and Services
Wisconsin Alzheimer’s Institute-Milwaukee Office
UW School of Medicine and Public Health
(414) 219-5083 | greenharris@wisc.edu
Or visit us online at wai.wisc.edu

One family’s story...

My dad has always been a good cook but lately, he doesn’t cook so much. He opens cans and heats the food on the stove. The refrigerator is over flowing with food that’s spoiling. He keeps telling me he’s going to eat it some day and I should leave it alone. I’m worried that he’ll get sick. I wonder if he has Alzheimer’s disease.

Adapted from www.nia.nih.gov/Alzheimers/AlzheimersInformation