



Section 3

Healthcare team and treatments

The Dementia Guide is for anyone who has been impacted by any form of dementia. The information in this guide is divided into sections. Each section relates to a particular stage of your dementia journey.

It is important to remember that everyone living with dementia is unique. The content in this guide is general in nature and we recommend you seek professional advice in relation to any specific concerns or issues you may have.

While we strive to keep content accurate and up-to-date, information can change over time. For updates, please visit dementia.org.au or call the **National Dementia Helpline** on **1800 100 500**.

Web: dementia.org.au/the-dementia-guide



“

Jack has kept his happy, easy-going personality and nature. ”

Gwen and Jack, Dementia Advocates. Jack lives with dementia.

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Scan the QR code to find out more about Jack and Gwen's story or visit: dementia.org.au/news/meet-gwen-and-jack

There is no known cure for dementia, but there are healthcare professionals, medications and other therapies that can help with some of the symptoms, including depression and anxiety. With the right support, people can live well with dementia for many years.

Throughout your dementia journey, you will receive treatment from different health professionals.

These can include:

- your doctor
- medical specialists
- allied health professionals
- nurses
- Dementia Australia.

Building your healthcare team

Working with your doctor

Developing a strong relationship with your doctor is an important step.

Your doctor can provide support, from diagnosis through to ongoing management and care. They can also refer you to specialist health professionals to treat specific dementia symptoms.

Your doctor and practice nurses need to get to know you. This will help them understand your dementia and recommend the best treatments. Be open and honest, and let them know if you do not understand something.

It can be helpful to have a family member or carer visit the doctor with you. They may offer other information about your needs, preferences and symptoms.

Make the most of your doctor visit

- Before your visit, write down a list of questions to ask.
- Book a long appointment so you have time to discuss things in detail.
- Take a list of the medications, vitamins and supplements you take.
- Keep a log of any changes you, your family and friends have noticed.
- Discuss your condition and document a dementia care plan together.
- Ask about support services to help you live well.
- Take notes and ask for information to bring home with you.

Working with medical specialists

During the different stages of dementia, you may be treated by different medical professionals. Each will be relevant to different symptoms of the disease.

Your doctor may refer you to a specialist, such as a:

- **Geriatrician:** Specialising in diagnosing, treating and preventing disease in older adults (including dementia).
- **Psycho-geriatrician:** Specialising in diagnosing and treating mental and emotional disorders in older adults.
- **Neurologist:** Specialising in diagnosing and treating people with abnormalities of the brain and central nervous system.
- **Neuropsychiatrist:** Specialising in the behavioural and psychological effects of neurological diseases or injury to the brain.

- **Psychiatrist:** Specialising in diagnosing, treating and preventing mental illness and emotional problems.
- **Neuropsychologist:** Provides ways to cope with behavioural changes as a result of changes to the brain and help in making a diagnosis.

You should always feel comfortable with your medical team. If you are unhappy, ask your doctor for another referral. Do not worry about offending them. It is common to ask for a second opinion.

Working with allied health professionals

Allied health professionals form a vital part of your healthcare team.

They help you maintain your quality of life, independence, self-care and mobility. They also help reduce the risk of complications due to other conditions or injuries.

Allied health professionals work in both private and public healthcare settings. Speak to your doctor about accessing allied health services as part of your dementia care plan. At each stage of your dementia journey, you should discuss your changing needs with your doctor.

If you have private health cover, contact your insurer to find out what health services are included.

The people you might meet

- **Community nurse:** Provides health assessments, continence care, medication and wound management or palliative care in the home.
- **Counsellor, psychologist or dementia consultant:** Helps you adjust to change and to recognise your feelings and emotions.
- **Dietitian:** Provides advice for maintaining a healthy diet.
- **Diversional therapist:** Designs recreation programs based on your interests and abilities.

- **Music therapist:** Helps improve your health, functioning and wellbeing using music.
- **Occupational therapist:** Assesses your abilities and provides support to help you stay independent.
- **Optometrist:** Checks your eyesight and monitors for any eye conditions.
- **Oral health worker:** Works with your dentist to keep your mouth, teeth and gums in good condition.
- **Podiatrist:** Maintains the health of your feet.
- **Physiotherapist or exercise physiologist:** Helps you improve your strength, balance and movement.
- **Speech pathologist:** Helps you find ways to communicate with others if speaking has become difficult. May also perform swallowing assessments when there is difficulty eating or taking oral medication.

Understanding your treatment options

While there is no cure, there are treatment options to help alleviate some of the symptoms or reduce the rate of progression, depending on your type of dementia.

Learning about treatment options can help you to live as well as possible and maintain a good quality of life.

Some treatments can provide temporary improvement of symptoms.

Drug treatments

Certain drugs can alleviate some of the symptoms and reduce the rate of progression. Their effectiveness depends on your type of dementia.

You should talk to your doctor about drug options that may be available to you.

Questions to ask

- Are there any medications that can help me?
- Why are you offering me this medication?
- How will this medication help me?
- How do I take this medication?
- What happens if I miss a dose?
- Can I still take my other medication?
- Can I drink alcohol?
- Can I still drive my car?
- Will it impact my work?
- How can I reduce potential side effects?
- What changes should I tell you about?
- Are there other treatments I could try instead?
- Is there information I can take home with me?

Lifestyle factors

Keeping the body and mind active is essential. Engaging in everyday activities, interests and social groups can be satisfying and fulfilling. Exercise and eating well can optimise your physical health, improve your mood and may even slow down changes in the brain.

Complementary therapies

Complementary therapies include a variety of treatments and practices that can support conventional medical treatments. These therapies may be described as ‘alternative’, ‘traditional’ or ‘holistic’. Complementary therapies can help promote wellbeing and improve your quality of life, although the evidence to support their use is still being explored.

It is recommended that you discuss the use of complementary therapies with your doctor or specialist before you start using them. Some complementary therapies may not interact well with your current medications or could have an impact on other health issues you experience.

Therapies can include:

- natural products and supplements, including herbs, vitamins and minerals
- practices that involve manipulation of parts of the body, such as massage, chiropractic and osteopathy
- mind-body practices, including meditation, hypnotherapy, aromatherapy and music
- energy-based therapies like reiki and Therapeutic Touch
- alternative medical systems, such as traditional Chinese medicine (including acupuncture and herbal medicine), Ayurvedic medicine, homeopathy and naturopathy.

Treating depression and anxiety

People with dementia, their families and carers, may experience depression or anxiety.

It is important to seek help. You should discuss treatment options with your doctor.

Drug treatments

Prescription drugs are one approach to treat depression and anxiety.

Antidepressant drugs work by correcting the levels of some chemicals in the brain. It can take several weeks to notice the benefits of taking an antidepressant.

Some people experience side effects to begin with, but these usually lessen after a week or two. It is important to keep your doctor informed about how you are feeling and how medications are affecting you. Your doctor can then help you find a drug and dosage that works best for you.

Non-drug treatments

Depression and anxiety can also be responsive to non-drug treatments or a combination of drug and non-drug treatments.

Non-drug treatments include:

- talk therapies, such as counselling
- reminiscence activities, where you recall past events

- mindfulness activities, such as meditation
- life story work, where you record key moments of the past in a scrapbook or album.

Other things that can help with depression and anxiety include:

- keeping active
- engaging in enjoyable activities
- talking to friends and family
- maintaining a healthy diet
- reducing alcohol or caffeine.

“

Sometimes it takes me a long time to respond because my thoughts don't flow as quickly. If people take the time to wait, rather than try and tell me what I am trying to say, it makes me feel much better. ”

Bobby, a Dementia Advocate who is living with dementia