

Signs and Symptoms of Dementia

A First Nations Guide

Some facts:

Rates of dementia in First Nations people are higher than they are in non-First Nations people in Canada. Research suggests that the number will continue to rise and by 2031 there may be a 4.6 times increase in the number of on-reserve First Nations people living with dementia.

Symptoms of dementia may begin in people as young as 45 to 50 or may begin much later depending on the type of dementia. Recent studies suggest that Alzheimer's disease and dementia may occur as much as **10 years earlier** in First Nations people compared to non-First Nations people in Canada.

Research with Indigenous people in Canada suggests that Alzheimer's disease and age-related dementias are not being diagnosed early enough for clients and families to benefit from locally available care and support services.

Some First Nations may be reluctant to discuss forgetfulness or memory loss with health care providers for many reasons. For example:

- They consider it a **normal part of aging** and not problematic
- They have **not had good experiences** with health care providers in the past
- They do not think a **diagnosis** would make any difference
- They are **embarrassed** and do not want others to know about their symptoms
- They **do not want to take** the memory tests
- They have **difficulty accessing** health services

When is forgetfulness a part of normal aging and when might it be a symptom of illness?

Forgetting can be a normal part of getting older. We may forget to pay a bill, lose things, and find it hard to remember the words we want to use every once in a while. It can be normal for our memories of events to be less detailed than they once were, we may take a little bit longer to remember. Sometimes we may have words on the tips of our tongues that we cannot find in the moment.

When these types of forgetting become worse over time or begin to happen more often, it may be a sign that something is wrong. For example, missing one bill payment once in a while may be normal, but missing many payments and not being able to manage money may not be normal. Losing track of the day may be normal, but losing track of the month or season is not. Difficulty finding the words we want may sometimes be normal, but not being able to carry on a conversation is not.

Why should we seek care for forgetfulness or memory loss?

Forgetfulness caused by dementia progresses from mild to moderate to severe over time. Seeking help for memory loss early is important. If you are worried, you should speak to a health care worker or your doctor. An accurate diagnosis can determine if the forgetfulness is related to Alzheimer's, dementia, or other illnesses that can be more easily treated. For example, medication errors, drug interactions, and complications arising from other infections or diseases can also cause forgetfulness and confusion. If memory loss is found to be caused by a dementia illness, an early diagnosis will help to make sure people are receiving the most appropriate treatment and care strategies. An early diagnosis can help ensure the client and their family has access to the support services and information they need.

