

Stroke explained

# Vascular dementia

Together we can conquer stroke

# Vascular dementia is a common type of dementia that can be linked to stroke.

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In this booklet we talk about what vascular dementia is, what causes it and what you should do if you are diagnosed with it.

It's aimed at people who have had a stroke or who think they may have vascular dementia, but there is information for family and friends as well.

We have information on all aspects of stroke.

If you have a question that is not answered in this booklet, visit **stroke.org.uk** or call our Stroke Helpline on **0303 3033 100**



If you want more information on this topic, take a look at our *Complete guide to vascular dementia*. Go to **stroke.org.uk/publications** to find it.

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# What is vascular dementia?

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Dementia is a condition that can affect your memory, thinking, communication, mood and behaviour. It happens when **parts of your brain become damaged**. There are different types of dementia and it's possible to have more than one.

Vascular dementia is a common type of dementia. It happens when the blood supply to your brain is cut off, so it doesn't get the oxygen and nutrients that it needs. This causes brain cells to die.

Vascular dementia **affects people in different ways**. The symptoms you have will depend on the areas of your brain that have been damaged.



## **Signs of vascular dementia**

If you or the people around you notice any of the symptoms below, you should go to see your GP:

- not being able to understand or respond to things very quickly
- becoming confused
- not being able to remember things
- finding it difficult to concentrate
- not being able to find the right word when you're speaking
- seeming down or depressed
- behaving differently, especially if you're being aggressive or behaving inappropriately
- not being able to control your emotions
- finding it difficult to walk and keep your balance
- having problems controlling your bladder
- seeing or hearing things that aren't there
- believing things that aren't true.

Sometimes symptoms of vascular dementia can be confused with the effects of stroke. The difference is that vascular dementia gets worse over time. If you're unsure, go to see your GP.

## How is it linked to stroke?

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When you have a stroke, the blood supply to parts of your brain is cut off and the cells in these areas die. This can sometimes lead to vascular dementia.

This can happen after a single stroke, but it's more likely to be caused by lots of small strokes. These create lots of small areas of damage in your brain. Often these strokes can be so small that you do not know you are having them. These are known as **silent strokes**.

Vascular dementia can also be caused by **small vessel disease**. This is when the small blood vessels, deep within your brain become narrow and clogged up. This stops blood from getting to parts of your brain. This can cause damage over time, which can then lead to vascular dementia.

Many of the things that increase your risk of small vessel disease, like high blood pressure and diabetes, also increase your risk of stroke.

# What should I do if I think I have vascular dementia?

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If you're noticing signs of vascular dementia, then you need to **go and see your GP** as soon as possible.

Your GP will talk to you and do a number of tests to see what may be causing your symptoms.

It's probably a good idea to take a friend or family member to help you answer your GP's questions. They may have noticed symptoms that you haven't or be more aware of how long you've had them.

If your GP isn't able to find any other causes, they will refer you to a dementia specialist. These doctors are often based within a **memory clinic**, so it's possible that you may be referred to one of these. Memory clinics are services that have been set up all over the UK to help people with dementia.

## Does vascular dementia get better?

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Sadly, there is **no cure for vascular dementia**. It is a progressive condition, which means it gets worse over time.

How quickly it progresses is different for everyone. Your symptoms may stay the same for months or even years, but then they will suddenly get worse.

Although your dementia will not get any better, it **may be possible to slow down** how quickly it progresses by reducing your risk of having further strokes. To do this you may need to:

- take medication to lower your blood pressure or cholesterol
- take medication to thin your blood
- stop smoking
- eat a healthy diet
- drink less alcohol
- do more exercise.

There may also be things that can help to improve your symptoms such as medication, physiotherapy or other types of therapy. Your specialist will be able to explain what they think is best for you.



# What should I do if I'm diagnosed with vascular dementia?

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## Talk to someone

Being told that you've got vascular dementia is devastating. Suddenly your future is not what you thought it would be. You may feel shock, anger, grief or worry, and not just for yourself but for the people around you too. Dealing with these feelings is hard, so it can help to talk to someone about it.

Many people find **support groups** helpful, because you can talk about your problems with people who are going through the same thing. Or you could talk to **a friend or family member** instead – whoever you feel most comfortable confiding in.

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### Get the information you need

You're going to have lots of questions. You may wonder what's going to happen and worry about not being able to do things for yourself. Finding out as much as you can will help to ease your fears.

There is a lot of information to take in when you're first diagnosed, so don't be afraid to go back and **ask your doctor questions**, even if it's months later. We've suggested some things to ask below.



#### Questions to ask your specialist:

- What stage is my dementia?
- Will my symptoms get worse?
- How quickly will it happen?
- Is there anything I can do to slow it down?
- Are there any treatments that can help me with my symptoms?
- How often will I have appointments with you?
- What services are available to help me?
- Who can I talk to about care at home?
- Are there support groups that I can contact?
- Is there anything else I should think about?

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### **Plan for the future**

Things are going to change as your dementia gets worse. Starting to plan for this now will help you and your family feel more prepared. Here are some things that you may want to think about:

#### **Your medical care**

Your doctor should talk to you about developing a care plan. This is an agreement between you and your doctors about the care you want to receive.

#### **Your care at home**

There are lots of services to help you at home. Your GP should be able to put you in touch with the services you need. Or you can contact one of the organisations we've listed on page 15 to find out about the support you can get.

#### **Driving**

You will need to tell your insurance company that you have dementia. You will also have to inform the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) if you live in England, Scotland or Wales, or the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) if you live in Northern Ireland. Your GP will be able to tell you what to do.

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## **Work and money**

It's a good idea to get your finances in order as soon as possible. Make sure you have all the important documents you need, in a place where you can easily find them. Contact your local Citizen's Advice Bureau, as they will be able to do a benefits check to see if you can get financial support from the government. They can also offer you advice about your rights and the support your employer should offer if you are still working.

## **Legal matters**

There may be a time in the future when your symptoms mean you're no longer able to make decisions for yourself. It's important to plan for this while you're still able to. There are some things that can help you do this:

- a **Power of Attorney** is a legal document that allows you to choose someone to make decisions for you when you're no longer able to make them yourself. You can choose someone to look after your property and finances and someone to look after your health and care, or it can be the same person who looks after both.

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- an **advance decision or directive** allows you to refuse any medical treatments that you don't want to have in the future. It is a legal document and your doctors and family have to follow what it says. Make sure you talk to your doctor before you make an advance decision.
  - an **advance statement** sets out all of your wishes for the future. It can include any aspect of your life such as where you want to live and how you would like to be cared for. It is not a legal document, but the people making decisions for you should take it into account.
  - a **will** allows you to decide what happens to your money and possessions when you die. If you already have a will, make sure it's up-to-date.



It's very important to get the right advice before making any of these decisions. Your local Citizen's Advice Bureau or one of the organisations we've listed on page 15 will be able to help you.

# Where can I get help and support?

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If you or your family are worried about vascular dementia, then **speak to your GP**.

## How we can help



Our **Stroke Helpline** can give you information and support on any issue you or your family may be facing after stroke. Whatever the problem, we're here to help.



We have **coordinators** in some areas of the UK, who can give you and your family information, practical advice and emotional support. We also run **stroke groups** across the UK. Even if we don't run one in your area, we can tell you about others that do.



Or you can talk to other people affected by stroke on our online forum TalkStroke or on our Facebook page. Visit **stroke.org.uk/talkstroke** or **facebook.com/TheStrokeAssociation**

To find out how we can help, just get in touch:

- call our Stroke Helpline on **0303 3033 100**
- email **info@stroke.org.uk**
- visit **stroke.org.uk**

## Other organisations that can help

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The following organisations provide information and advice for people affected by all kinds of dementia. If you'd like to know about others, contact our Stroke Helpline.

**Dementia UK** provides support through specialist dementia nurses, known as Admiral Nurses.

**Website:** [dementiauk.org](http://dementiauk.org)

**Admiral Nursing DIRECT:** 0845 257 9406

(Mon–Fri, 9.15am–4.45pm)

**Email:** [direct@dementiauk.org](mailto:direct@dementiauk.org)

**Alzheimer's Society** works in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. They provide information and advice about living with dementia and caring for someone who has it.

**Website:** [alzheimers.org.uk](http://alzheimers.org.uk)

**National dementia helpline:** 0300 222 1122

(Mon–Fri 9am–5pm, Sat–Sun 10am–4pm)

**Email:** [enquiries@alzheimers.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@alzheimers.org.uk)

**Alzheimer's Scotland** have local dementia advisers who can support families. They also have a 24 hour helpline.

**Website:** [alzscot.org](http://alzscot.org)

**Dementia Helpline:** 0808 808 3000

**Email:** [helpline@alzscot.org](mailto:helpline@alzscot.org)

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**Citizen's Advice** provides free, confidential advice about legal and financial matters. To find your local bureau visit one of the websites below or look in your local telephone directory. You can also find information online by visiting their Adviceguide website.

**Citizen's Advice Bureau**

(England, Northern Ireland and Wales)

**Website:** [www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)

**Citizen's Advice Scotland**

**Website:** [www.cas.org.uk](http://www.cas.org.uk)

**Citizen's Advice Bureau Adviceguide**

**Website:** [www.adviceguide.org.uk](http://www.adviceguide.org.uk)



## Tips for family and friends

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It can be difficult to know what to do when someone you love is diagnosed with vascular dementia. So here are some suggestions.



### Talk to each other

Coming to terms with dementia is difficult. But **planning for the future together** can help you both deal with the worry and fear that you're likely to have. The more you understand what your friend or family member wants, the more confident you will be when it comes to making decisions for them in the future. So start talking about it now and make as many plans as you can.



### Find out as much as you can

Your friend or family member is going to need more care as their condition gets worse, which may fall to you. Becoming a carer is not something most people feel prepared for. So you need to find out as much as you can at the start. **Talk to their doctor** and make sure you understand your friend or family member's condition and how it's likely to change. **Ask your GP and local council** about the practical and financial support you can get.



### **Don't forget about your own needs**

You can't care for someone if you're not taking care of yourself. So look after your health and make sure you **use all the support that's available** to you. Have a list of jobs that you can give to other people when they offer to help, like going to the supermarket or doing some washing.

If you care for someone you are entitled to **have your own carer's assessment** to make sure you're getting the support you need. Ask your GP or contact your local council if you've not had one.



### **Find someone to talk to**

Caring for someone else is emotionally as well as physically demanding. Even if you're not a full-time carer, coping with the fact that someone close to you has dementia is difficult. So make sure you have someone to talk to about it.

Talking to other carers or families that are dealing with dementia could be helpful. So find out about **carers' or other support groups** that you could go along to. The organisations on page 15 will be able to tell you about groups in your area.

## About our information

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We want to provide the best information for people affected by stroke. That's why we ask stroke survivors and their families, as well as medical experts, to help us put our publications together.



How did we do? To tell us what you think of this guide, or to request a list of the sources we used to create it, email us at **[feedback@stroke.org.uk](mailto:feedback@stroke.org.uk)**



## We are the Stroke Association

We believe in life after stroke. That's why we support stroke survivors to make the best recovery they can. It's why we campaign for better stroke care. And it's why we fund research to develop new treatments and ways of preventing stroke.

**We're here for you. If you'd like to know more please get in touch.**

**Stroke Helpline:** 0303 3033 100

**Website:** [stroke.org.uk](http://stroke.org.uk)

**Email:** [info@stroke.org.uk](mailto:info@stroke.org.uk)

**From a textphone:** 18001 0303 3033 100

Text **STROKE 5** to **70300** to donate **£5**. It only takes a couple of seconds to make a BIG difference.

For more information visit [stroke.org.uk/savelives](http://stroke.org.uk/savelives)

Texts cost your donation amount plus one message at your standard network charity rate. The Stroke Association will receive 100% of your gift. Always ask the bill payer's permission. For questions about donating by text call 0330 6600 425.

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Version 2. Published: April 2015

To be reviewed: April 2018.

Item code: **A01F29**

