

Vascular dementia

Stroke
association

Vascular dementia

Together we can conquer stroke

Vascular dementia is a type of dementia that is linked to stroke.

In this guide 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 guide, visit **stroke.org.uk** or call our Stroke Helpline on **0303 3033 100**.



If you're looking for more information on this topic you may want to 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?



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

Vascular dementia is a common type of dementia. It happens when the blood supply to your brain is reduced. This can be due to blood vessels inside the brain being clogged up, or a series of "mini strokes". Over time, areas of brain cells stop working, leading to symptoms of dementia.

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



Worried about problems with memory and thinking?

It's important to remember that problems with memory and thinking are not always due to dementia. If you are worried about this, visit your GP.

Signs of vascular dementia



If you or the people around you notice any of the signs below, you should visit your GP:

- not being able to understand or respond to things very quickly
- not being able to remember things
- finding it difficult to concentrate
- not being able to find the right word when you're speaking
- struggling to plan ahead for everyday tasks
- difficulty in learning new tasks
- seeming down or depressed.

At a later stage, signs may include:

- becoming confused
- behaving differently, especially if you're being aggressive or behaving inappropriately
- lacking motivation
- not being able to control your emotions
- finding it difficult to walk and keep your balance
- having problems controlling your bladder.

Both stroke and vascular dementia can cause problems with memory, thinking and mood. Strokes happen suddenly while the symptoms of vascular dementia often get worse over time.

How is vascular dementia linked to stroke?



When you have a stroke, the blood supply to part of your brain is cut off, killing brain cells. The damage from the stroke can cause problems with memory and thinking. For many people these problems improve over time. If the problems don't improve, or get worse, this may be a sign of vascular dementia.

Another cause of vascular dementia is when many small strokes happen, creating 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. Damage to the brain cells occurs 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?



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 specialist. Different specialists can help people with vascular dementia, such as a hospital consultant, a psychologist or a specialist nurse.

Does vascular dementia get better?



There are treatments to help with some of the symptoms and causes of vascular dementia. At the moment we do not have a treatment that cures vascular dementia. For many people vascular dementia will get worse over time. How quickly it progresses is different for everyone. Your symptoms may stay the same for months or even years.

Some things you can do may slow down the changes caused by dementia. You may need to:

- take medication to reduce high blood pressure or cholesterol
- take medication to thin your blood
- take medication for depression or anxiety
- stop smoking
- eat healthily and take exercise
- drink less alcohol
- keep your mind active with puzzles, games, activities and an active social life.

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?

1

Talk to someone

Being told that you've got vascular dementia can be 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 round 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.

2

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 on the following page.



Questions to ask your specialist

- Is there anything I can do to slow down the changes?
- Are there any treatments that can help me with my symptoms?
- Do I need any scans or blood tests?
- Is this the kind of dementia that runs in families?
- Can I continue to drive?
- 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?

3

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 in the *Where to get help and information* section 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.

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 find them easily. Contact your local Citizen's Advice, 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. There are different types of power of attorney, so it's important to get advice before you make one. Your local Citizen's Advice or a solicitor can advise you.
- An **advance decision**, sometimes called a living will, allows you to refuse medical treatments you might be offered in the future. In England and Wales, your doctors and family have to follow what it says. In Scotland and Northern Ireland an Advance Directive is not legally

binding but it has a strong influence on the decisions doctors make. It's very important to 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 would like to live when you're not able to live on your own, how you would like to be cared for, or choices about your diet. It is not legally binding, but it will help the people involved in your care to understand your wishes.
- 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 or one of the organisations we've listed in the *Other sources of help and information* section will be able to help you.

Where to get help and information



Talk to us

Our Stroke Helpline is for anyone affected by a stroke, including family, friends and carers. The Helpline can give you information and support on any aspect of stroke. Call us on **0303 3033 100**, from a textphone **18001 0303 3033 100** or email **info@stroke.org.uk**.



My Stroke Guide

My Stroke Guide is the stroke support tool and online community from the Stroke Association. Log on at **mystrokeguide.com**. Our Enquiry Line can support you with using My Stroke Guide: call **0300 222 5707** or email **mystrokeguide@stroke.org.uk**.



Talk to others affected by stroke

There may be a stroke group in your local area where you can meet other stroke survivors. You can meet people on our My Stroke Guide online chat forum at **mystrokeguide.com**, and our Facebook page **Facebook.com/TheStrokeAssociation**.

Call our Helpline or visit **stroke.org.uk/support** for more information on stroke groups and other face-to-face support.

Other sources of help and information

The following organisations can provide information, advice and support. If you'd like to know about others in your area, contact our Stroke Helpline.

Alzheimer's Scotland

Website: www.alzscot.org

24 hour Dementia Helpline: 0808 808 3000

Email: helpline@alzscot.org

Has local dementia advisers who can support families. They also have a 24 hour helpline.

Alzheimer's Society

Website: www.alzheimers.org.uk

National dementia helpline: 0300 222 1122

Email: enquiries@alzheimers.org.uk

Works in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. They provide information and advice about living with dementia and caring for someone who has it.

Citizen's Advice

Website: www.citizensadvice.org.uk

Provides free, confidential advice about legal and financial matters. To find your local Citizen's Advice, visit one of the websites below or look in your local telephone directory.

Dementia UK

Website: www.dementiauk.org

Dementia Helpline: 0845 257 9406

Email: direct@dementiauk.org

Provides support through specialist dementia nurses, known as Admiral Nurses.



Joining a research study

You may be eligible to take part in a research study. Research helps us improve diagnosis and care for stroke and dementia. If you are asked to be in a study, you can discuss any questions with the researchers, and you can also talk to your GP.

To find out about taking part in dementia research, visit **www.joindementiaresearch.nihr.ac.uk**.

Tips for family and friends

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 the GP 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 could be helpful. There are also carers' or other support groups that you could go along to. The organisations in the *Other sources of help and information* section will be able to tell you about groups in your area.

About our information

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.



Accessible formats

Visit our website if you need this information in audio, large print or braille.



Always get individual advice

Please be aware that this information is not intended as a substitute for specialist professional advice tailored to your situation. We strive to ensure that the content we provide is accurate and up-to-date, but information can change over time. So far as is permitted by law, the Stroke Association does not accept any liability in relation to the use of the information in this publication, or any third-party information or websites included or referred to.

Contact us

We're here for you. Contact us for expert information and support by phone, email and online.

Stroke Helpline: 0303 3033 100

From a textphone: 18001 0303 3033 100

Email: info@stroke.org.uk

Website: 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 rely on your support to fund life-saving research and vital services for people affected by stroke. Join the fight against stroke now at stroke.org.uk/fundraising. Together we can conquer stroke.

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