

Alzheimer's
Research UK
Defeating Dementia



What is
vascular dementia?



Information in this booklet is for anyone who wants to know more about vascular dementia. This includes people living with vascular dementia, their carers, families and friends. The booklet aims to help you understand more about vascular dementia by giving an overview of the causes, symptoms and treatments.

The information here does not replace any advice that doctors, pharmacists or nurses may give you but provides some background information which we hope you will find helpful.

The booklet was written in January 2012 and is due to be updated in January 2014. Please contact us if you would like a version with references or in a different format.

Contents

03 What is vascular dementia?

04 Symptoms

05 Diagnosis

06 Treatments

06 Support

07 Causes

08 Risk factors

11 Research

What is vascular dementia?

Dementia is used to describe a group of symptoms – these include memory loss, confusion, mood changes and difficulty with day-to-day tasks.

Vascular dementia is the second most common cause of dementia after Alzheimer's disease and can occur when blood flow to the brain becomes reduced. Some people have both Alzheimer's and vascular dementia – often called mixed dementia.

Vascular dementia can also be called vascular cognitive impairment and describes a group of conditions. The most common of these are:

Stroke-related dementia

This includes multi-infarct dementia (MID) and dementia which occurs after a stroke (called post-stroke dementia).

Subcortical vascular dementia

(also called Binswanger's disease, small vessel disease-related dementia or lacunar state).



Symptoms

Vascular dementia can have symptoms similar to Alzheimer's, including memory loss. There can also be more specific symptoms and these may differ depending on the area of the brain that is affected.

These symptoms may include:

Becoming slower in thinking.

Disorientation and periods of confusion.

Personality changes, depression and apathy.

Becoming more emotional.

Difficulty walking or changes in the way a person walks.

Frequent urge to urinate or other bladder symptoms. This can be common in older age, but can be a feature of vascular dementia when seen with other symptoms.

The symptoms of vascular dementia get more severe over time. Vascular dementia normally progresses over several years but the rate of progression can vary during the course of the disease and from person to person. There may be a sudden or stepwise change following an event such as a stroke.

Diagnosis

It is important to get the right diagnosis so that appropriate treatments and help can be given.

If you are worried about your health or someone else's, you should talk to your GP.

If your GP suspects dementia, they may refer you to a memory clinic or another specialist clinic. You will be asked about your symptoms and medical history and may have a physical check-up and memory test. They may also send you for other tests including brain scans and blood tests. Together these tests will help a doctor to identify the problems in memory and thinking and the likely cause.

Brain scans such as CT (computerised tomography) or MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) may be helpful in giving a diagnosis of vascular dementia. This is because they allow doctors to look for the effects of changes in blood vessels which are common in this type of dementia.



Treatments

While there are currently no specific treatments for vascular dementia, a doctor may prescribe medication to treat underlying conditions. These could include

diabetes, stroke, high blood pressure, high cholesterol or heart problems. A doctor may also advise adopting a healthier lifestyle by stopping smoking, taking exercise, maintaining a normal weight and eating healthily. Some of the more specific symptoms of vascular dementia may be managed by physiotherapy, occupational therapy or speech therapy.

There are some drugs which may help with the symptoms in people with mixed dementia (vascular dementia and Alzheimer's). You can discuss your treatment options with your doctor.

For detailed information about the treatments available, you can also ask for our 'Treatments for dementia' booklet. Please see our contact details on the back of this booklet.

Support

For more details about dementia, including contact details of support organisations, you can visit our website at www.alzheimersresearchuk.org or ask us for our booklet 'All about dementia'. You can also speak to your GP or nurse for advice.

Causes

Vascular dementia is caused by a reduction in blood flow to the brain. Blood carries essential oxygen and nourishment to the brain and without it, brain cells can die. The network of blood vessels that carries blood around the body is called the vascular system. There are a number of different ways that blood vessels in the brain can become damaged leading to vascular dementia:

Stroke-related dementia. This occurs when parts of the brain become damaged following a stroke. A stroke occurs when blood supply to a part of the brain is suddenly cut off. This may cause difficulties in moving, problems with coordination, speech and sight depending on the part of the brain affected. If a stroke causes memory loss and problems with attention, then a person may be diagnosed with post-stroke dementia. Similar damage can also be caused by small strokes in the brain (or transient ischaemic attacks), which may be too small for a person to notice. This is sometimes called multi-infarct dementia.

Subcortical vascular dementia. This is caused by a series of small changes to blood vessels deep inside the brain. A person usually does not notice these changes but they can, over time, damage parts of the brain that are important for attention, memory and language.

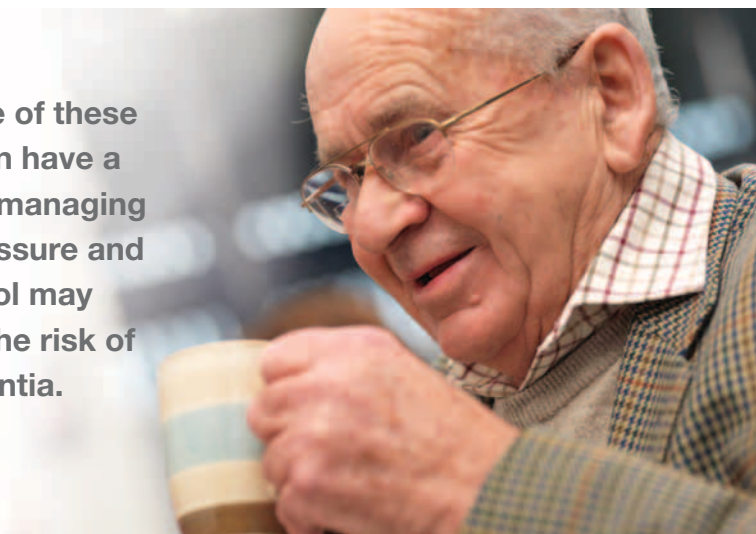
Risk factors

A number of factors may increase the likelihood of damage to blood vessels in the brain. These include smoking, high blood pressure (known as hypertension), high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, obesity or heart problems. For this reason, all of these factors can increase a person's risk of vascular dementia.

Although some of these risk factors can have a genetic basis, managing high blood pressure and high cholesterol may help to lower the risk of vascular dementia. Research suggests that regular exercise and a healthy diet, especially in midlife and beyond may also help to lower our risk.

In exceptionally rare cases, vascular dementia can be caused by an inherited genetic disorder. One disorder is called CADASIL (cerebral autosomal dominant arteriopathy with subcortical infarcts and leukoencephalopathy) which occurs in younger people and causes damage to blood vessels in the brain. If you are concerned about inherited forms of vascular dementia, you should discuss this with your GP.

Although some of these risk factors can have a genetic basis, managing high blood pressure and high cholesterol may help to lower the risk of vascular dementia.



Send me more information

For free information, simply complete this slip. You can drop it straight in a post box or put it in an envelope labelled with the freepost address overleaf. Alternatively, phone us on 01223 843899.

I would like to know more about

Dementia; symptoms, diagnosis, causes, prevention and care

Treatments for dementia

The latest dementia research

Title _____

Name _____

Address _____

We would like to keep you informed about our research and our progress in defeating dementia. However, if you do not wish to receive any further communications from us, please tick here:

No stamp
required,
but using one
will help us
put more
money into
research.

FREEPOST RRBV-CKHR-YBRA

Alzheimer's Research UK
Great Shelford
Cambridge
CB22 5LR

Research

Over the last decade Alzheimer's Research UK has funded more than **£5 million of pioneering research across the UK into vascular dementia.** This work will help to increase our understanding of the condition.

Research is looking at how blood vessels can become damaged in the brain and how this damage causes the symptoms seen in vascular dementia. Our scientists are also working to develop new and innovative ways of preventing and treating vascular dementia.

We believe that dementia can only be defeated through research. Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, we hope to fund many more pioneering studies into vascular dementia.



Have your say

We welcome your comments to help us produce the best information for you. You can let us know what you think about this booklet by contacting us using the details below.

About us

Alzheimer's Research UK is the UK's leading dementia research charity funding world-class research to find ways to prevent, treat or cure dementia. Help us defeat dementia by donating today

www.alzheimersresearchuk.org/donate

Contact us

Alzheimer's Research UK The Stables, Station Road, Great Shelford, Cambridge, CB22 5LR

Phone: 01223 843899 Email: enquiries@alzheimersresearchuk.org

www.alzheimersresearchuk.org

