

Dementia terminology

Neurocognitive disorder or dementia – what’s in a name? This Help Sheet provides information about changes to the medical terms used for dementia and related conditions.

Dementia describes a condition in which the cognitive, or thinking, functions of the brain are impaired. There are many different types or causes of dementia, with Alzheimer’s disease being the most common cause.

There are also many ways that dementia can be described or named. You might hear it being referred to as ‘dementia’, that is, the name of the condition/set of symptoms.

It may be referred to by the name of the disease causing the symptoms: examples include ‘Alzheimer’s disease’, ‘vascular dementia’, ‘younger onset dementia’ and there are many others.

You might also hear it being described as ‘neurocognitive disorder’.

The important thing is that if you are uncertain about a particular word or term used by someone in relation to dementia – whether it is a health professional, specialist, service provider, media source or family member – you can ask for clarification about what they mean.

You can also refer to this help sheet, which lists some of the different words used to describe dementia, the stages of dementia or symptoms of dementia.

How has dementia terminology developed?

The word ‘dementia’ stems from a Latin word and is now a very common way of describing the process through which the cognitive functions of the brain are impaired.

There are many names for the different diseases causing impairment of the brain. These may reflect the person who discovered that type of dementia (e.g. Alzheimer’s disease after Alois Alzheimer), describe the part of the brain specifically affected (e.g. frontotemporal dementia), or the section of the population that is affected (e.g. younger onset dementia).

Sometimes you might hear words that describe the stage of the disease: ‘prodromal dementia’ or ‘early’, ‘moderate’, ‘advanced’ dementia.

Another source for dementia terminology is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), which is used by many health professionals. It is published by the American Psychiatric Association and outlines the criteria a patient should meet (such as symptoms) in order to be diagnosed with a particular mental disorder. In this latest DSM-5 edition published in 2013, dementia has been renamed ‘Major Neurocognitive Disorder’. The DSM-5 also recognises earlier stages of cognitive impairment as ‘Mild Neurocognitive Disorder’.

The introduction of ‘neurocognitive disorders’ has been intended to address the limitations of and the stigma associated with the term dementia as well as more accurately capture the many different causes, symptoms and stages of cognitive impairment that can affect people at any age.

The introduction of the name ‘neurocognitive disorders’ does not mean that ‘dementia’ will no longer be used. In fact, the DSM-5 includes “or dementia” in brackets when referring to major neurocognitive disorders, in recognition of dementia’s history and familiarity. Nor will the new diagnostic criteria immediately change the way these conditions are diagnosed in clinical practice.

Dementia Terminology

The following table summarises the two key stages of cognitive impairment and the terms that may be used as a diagnostic or descriptive label at each stage. These terms may also be combined with the cause, such as Alzheimer’s disease.

Impairment may occur in attention, planning, inhibition, learning, memory, language, visual perception, spatial skills, social skills or other cognitive functions.

Stage	Diagnostic terms
Cognitive impairment that does not significantly interfere with daily function	Mild cognitive impairment Mild neurocognitive disorder Prodromal dementia Very mild/mild decline
Cognitive impairment that significantly interferes with daily function	Dementia Moderate dementia Moderate decline Advanced dementia Severe decline Major neurocognitive disorder

More detailed information about the diagnostic criteria is available in the Dementia Australia Help Sheet **Dementia Q&A 11 Diagnostic criteria for dementia**.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling. Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**, or visit our website at dementia.org.au

For language assistance phone the Translating and Interpreting Service on **131 450**

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